

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Wendy E. Oleson for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on May 3, 2006.

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Tracy Daugherty

This thesis is the first third of a coming of age novel called b. In this selection the central character, Bea Bouvier, prepares to see her estranged mother on a cruise ship to the Bahamas. She hopes her parents will decide to reunite as a family, though it becomes increasingly clear that her father is having an affair with the mother of her best friend. This novel tracks Bea's search for connections and identity in a world in which the behavior of adults seems utterly absurd.

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b

by
Wendy E. Oleson

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Wendy E. Oleson, Author

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To my Aunt Ann

Chapter 1

My mother, Anne, and Rachel's mother, Jacklyn, both had their only children by natural childbirth. Rachel and I were born in July, three days apart. My mother had chosen a warm water birthing process; when I surfaced, shiny and dripping, the umbilical chord slithered between us like an eel. Rachel was born on land; a midwife delivered her on the shag carpet of her maternal grandparent's ranch house in Bentonville, Arkansas.

Our mothers told us the stories when we asked them to. They told us how they rejected the six-inch long syringes that could have built a concrete wall between their consciousness and pain. They planned in their lifetimes to have only the child in their womb; they wanted to feel us. Their own mothers had been given a drug that erased the memory of pain but couldn't dampen the experience. As Rachel and I prepared to leave their bodies, our mothers chose nothing.

I was never baptized, unlike my mother who came from a family of Lutherans. She prayed for me as she first held me, thought I was beautiful, wished me all the love in the world; she prayed for me through the layers of mucus that clung to my body, and her caresses washed clean the cloud of blood that lingered then diffused in the water.

My father was supposed to be in the water too, except he'd broken his leg and couldn't risk getting the cast wet. Moisture will ripen your flesh like you wouldn't believe, the doctor had told him. They tried to wrap a garbage bag around the plaster and drop him in the tub with his leg hanging out the side, but my father, never completely comfortable in his body, soon cramped in the position. They hoisted him out (at this my mother thrilled, claustrophobia had descended upon her, and she'd been aiming ice chips at her husband's face), and got him settled back in his wheel chair next to the pool where he watched and sipped his lemonade.

As it had with my father, the birthing process made Rachel's father thirsty. According to Jacklyn, her husband didn't like the sight of blood. Phillip drank vodka tonics in the kitchen; he turned them pink with cranberry juice. He assured Jacklyn he was going light on the vodka and heavy on the cranberry and tonic, but she didn't care what he said. There wasn't anything outside of her body that she cared about. When she told Phillip to shut up, she twice called him Larry, something she could never explain. The midwife had assured the couple that neurons misfired during labor, made it easy to call a spoon a cucumber or a screwdriver a bucket; but Jacklyn didn't pay attention, and Phillip, who wore a green silk shirt and had been a runway model in Milan, thought midwives anachronistic and this particular one full of shit.

Before Rachel was born, Jacklyn had sung in the Lyric Opera of Chicago for two seasons. She played a recording of her performance in Manon Lescaut on the stereo during her daughter's birth. It was a double disc, and the midwife had to get up and change the discs back and forth a half dozen times. Phillip announced he'd memorized the soprano's title role. He strutted around and tried to sing. Jacklyn screamed at her husband and claimed to ruin her voice in the process.

Although our mothers chose to disown our fathers during childbirth (Jacklyn and Phillip divorced two years later), Rachel and I managed to be born, two Cancers on days when the sun had commanded the sky. Or that was the story. But there was another story that began when I was almost fifteen. When I was almost fifteen, I saved my mother.

"We are all so very bored," my father had said each night after my mother left. "She was bored, I am bored." He waxed poetic before he went to bed, after the local news. But I didn't think my mother had been bored. And so I had pardoned her; I had told my mother, on a balmy night in February, she could leave us for the ocean.

The months passed almost quickly at first, without her. It wasn't until May that I began to worry. What would I do with my summer days, my last summer before high school? I didn't like water, and Rachel was planning to work as a life guard at the Gainesville public pool. Instead, the pool closed when the Sunday morning custodian found a child at the bottom. I didn't want to be the kind of person who found symbolic meanings in such occurrences, but I didn't want to be callous, either. Rachel went to the child's funeral, the brother of a boy she'd kissed with her tongue. That tongue kiss had cost her James, the boy she'd been going out with for months. Rachel cried for days about James and the dead boy. She brought pink and white splotches to the surface of her skin. My father accused her of melodrama, and at the time I thought I agreed with him.

Despite all the tragedy, Rachel wasted no time finding a new job. One of her mother's friends owned a stationery store where well-manicured people ordered custom invitations for their weddings, baby showers, and cocktail parties. Rachel took an order for murder: a woman had come into the shop and described a party where her guests would act out ice-picking someone and then solve their own crime. At least they could solve their own crimes. Dealing with far less intrigue, I'd begun to work a few days a week after school at a library no one used. I shelved children's books. Even with the library's entire children's collection on my shelving cart, I could put them in their place again (Dewey Decimal) in less than half an hour. This left me with at least an hour to curl up against the pillows and the big stuffed bear, Mr. Beasley (a germ magnet), to read.

A stable child, I drank enough milk at home with my father. Occasionally, he made casseroles, and smelling summer, he began to experiment with braised and seared meats (I aspired to vegetarianism). I likely got all the proper nutrients, except when I went to Rachel's house. We didn't eat much there. And the kitchen walls were the pink of an empty stomach. It was becoming

increasingly clear to me that Rachel had a problem, a food problem. An eating disorder, but I didn't want to think of it like that. Often, Rachel avoided food. Once I watched her eat an entire medium pizza. I doubted Jacklyn noticed her daughter had a problem. Jacklyn fed the dog but not us. She made her dog, Luciano, special treats by baking potatoes, mashing them and rolling the flesh into grape-sized balls.

Once, only once, when Jacklyn was preparing Luci's potato, she asked me about my mother. I told her about the photographs my mother had sent from her life on the ocean. On the back of one of the pictures she wrote that Bahamian water itself had no color. It reflected a bitter blue where the ocean was deep and a light emerald where you could touch the bottom. Still, in the photographs, I couldn't see any depth. The colors looked like heavy blankets draped across the water's surface.

In another picture my mother held a carved watermelon. Against the melon's pale, waxy rind, the insides were so deeply saturated I couldn't decide if the flesh was pink or red. My mother loved to use knives. At home she had seemed to cook only with knives, never bothering with spatulas, ladles or wooden spoons. Once I saw her stir stew with a butcher knife. I remember dunking my entire bowl into the fiery metal pot before sitting down to dinner. She sent the photograph so I would think she carved that melon (she told us she was the ship's chef), except in it, she wears no chef's hat or apron. She squints into sunlight brighter than I've ever seen. I looked and remembered again that she was my mother, though her smile was too big, her teeth too white.

*

On that first weekend in May, the first Mother's Day without my mother, I gathered my notebook and a couple of library books into my backpack. Rachel and I were going to work on our history reports together. When I stepped outside, the singing of insects buzzed louder than it should have for May. The humidity was equally oppressive, and the combination made me appreciate an afternoon indoors, even if it would be spent working on a history report.

My father wore his yellow gloves; he knelt in his garden. He had dragged my mother's small color television outside so he could watch a gardening program while he gardened. Thank god for the extension cord! He would say as he carried the tv outside. Without the electrical snake he wouldn't be able to host Sylvia among his roses. *Sylvia's Garden* gave my father everything he needed for sixty minutes seven days a week. He even had a *Sylvia's Garden* trowel which he'd received as a gift for supporting the public television station. He kept it in the living room on the bookcase next to a cracked and empty green vase. If my mother were here she would not let my father bring her television out of doors. If my mother were here he wouldn't need to.

"Bye, Dad." My father had dense facial hair that trapped sweat like a honey comb. Sweat dripped in his eyes despite his bushy brows.

"Bea!" He waved his yellow hand. "Over to Rachel's?"

"I'll be back later." I watched my father make a thumbs up sign. He had begun doing this a month or so earlier, and I still hadn't figured out where it had come from. My father did not seem like the hand-signal type—he was more likely to consider hand-signals gang activity than something he would use to communicate with his nearly fifteen-year-old daughter. Still, he made the thumbs up, and I responded in kind. I tried to leave the house while he gardened because I knew he wouldn't engage me in any elaborate conversations. He would soon be returning inside; it was a Sunday and almost eleven o' clock; he liked to be grading papers by noon. My father taught nineteenth and twentieth century French literature at the University of Florida. He'd exhausted the past year on his Emma Bovary book: Flaubert's Madame: C'est moi, aussi, Planting a Purged Language. Without his wife he still had plenty of things to do.

Rachel and Jacklyn lived four houses away. From the sidewalk, Rachel's house resembled a child's drawing: two windows like bulging eyes and the front door a gaping mouth. That would always be my memory of it. Rachel's house wasn't large, and even I could tell that the overgrown trees and grasses threatened to devour it. There was a dark brown spot on the driveway, a place where the cement had burned. Rachel called it the blood spot, and years before, we would color it in with the chalk we used to play hopscotch. I avoided the blood spot. Rachel would say that stepping on the spot would cut your mother's throat.

When I let myself into Rachel's house, the doorknob was hot. I took off my sneakers to enjoy the cool tiles that stretched from the entryway to Rachel's bedroom. Sheet music fanned across the bench of Jacklyn's grand piano; perhaps she had recently given a singing lesson. I thought the black piano looked funny standing on the white tiles. The contrast made me imagine two worlds meeting there on the ground--the tiles appeared antiseptic under the rich, dark curves of the instrument.

Before Rachel and Jacklyn moved into the house, all the walls had been painted white except for the pink kitchen. Soon Rachel had wanted her room painted the same pink; Jacklyn took her to buy a can of paint, only one, and Rachel and I managed to paint the wall with the window before we ran out of paint and interest in the project. I opened the door to Rachel's room and let my book bag slouch to the floor.

Rachel sat on her bed with a Diet Coke propped between her legs. She'd probably been sitting and staring. "What's up, Bea?"

"Where's Luci?" He usually let me hold him and scratch under his chin.

"Napping with my mom," Rachel grimaced, "I don't have shit to give my mom."

I doubted Jacklyn even realized it was Mother's Day. "What about the heart pillow we made in Mrs. Glenn's class?" Our home economics teacher had given us a special assignment so we wouldn't have to worry about buying our mothers a present. I'd kept the pillow I made for myself, though.

“Oh, please.” Rachel grumbled, turning away from me slightly, toward the window. This struck me as an oddly cinematic posture. “We need to get flowers from your dad’s garden. My mom loves flowers.”

Rachel had never asked this before. Her face looked dark yet hopeful. I felt too far away to say no to her. My father didn’t like people cutting his flowers. He decided when they would be cut and for whom. Though they were living things entirely outside his body, he believed the roses and lilies belonged to him as much as his arms or legs. When Grand-mère, his mother, was alive, he didn’t cultivate half of the blossoms he did now, and he wasn’t half as serious about it. Nevertheless, one of the few times I remember him raising his voice to her came in response to the dozen tulips she had murdered. She had plucked off their heads and gathered them in the pockets of her sweater. My father had been sure some boys at the end of the street were to blame until my mother found the torn and water-logged bits of pink petal skin in the laundry.

“We could ask my dad which flowers you can take.” I hoped Rachel would agree, but she had a cloying look, her mouth pressed back at the corners.

“It would mean more to my mother if I could pick them out myself. I know what she likes.” Rachel looked at my bare feet. “Let’s go.”

I didn’t tell her that my father might still be working in the garden; I wanted him to be the one to stop her. I watched Rachel as we headed back toward my house. She had developed a strange gait over the past months—a kind of lanky swagger that made strangers stare. I had to adjust my stride to stay with her; even so, she pushed ahead of me into the garden. My father had gone inside already.

“This one stinks.” Rachel had her nose buried in a flower I couldn’t name. “In a good way.” She pulled a pair of plastic safety scissors out of her pocket; how could the blades cut through the thick stems?

“Did you take those from art class?” I knew that people didn’t buy scissors that cheap on purpose; they’d come from an institution.

“I don’t remember.” Rachel struggled to make her first cut. She quickly changed her technique and tried to close the blades on the stem with both hands in a variety of doomed manipulations of the safety scissors. I kept turning my head from her to the door of my house, expecting my father to come through at any second. I gripped blades of grass between my toes.

“This isn’t working, Bea.” Her tone was accusatory.

“Those are horrible scissors. I don’t know why you stole them.”

“God, Bea,” Rachel dropped the scissors and tried to tear the stem in half with her hands; it wouldn’t tear. “It’s not like you’re helping me any.”

“My dad will kill me if he sees this.”

She didn't seem to care. I watched her bend further into the blossoms and leaves. I decided I would squat too, hiding from a particular gardener who might look through the kitchen window. Rachel dropped from a crouch to her knees. She chewed and bit a stem. "Eeckh! Bitter!"

I wondered if the flower might be poisonous, but the thought slipped away. I heard noises coming from my house and looked to the front door, ready to bolt at the first sign of my father. I didn't have a decent sight line so I left Rachel in the garden and stood at its perimeter.

"Doesn't your dad have a tool for this?" Rachel emerged with a leaf in her hair.

"In the garage," I said. Her determination intrigued me, made me resent my father's stinginess. I didn't understand his behavior anymore. His concern for me came in sporadic fits. Once we ran out of toilet paper for two days. I borrowed a roll from Rachel for my bathroom but didn't know how my father had managed. Other times I'd come home from school to find him cleaning the inside of the refrigerator with Windex. The flowers in my father's garden were beautiful—why couldn't we enjoy them outside that eight by ten foot space?

Rachel's mood improved as soon as she got her hands on the garden shears. We returned to the orange flowers with the red centers, bursting hearts, Rachel called them. I pointed at the stems where I thought she should cut. They oozed and got the blades sticky. "Will four look good?" Rachel asked.

"No." I hadn't been punished for eight months now. I hadn't thought my dad could bear it if another family member stopped liking him. Letting Rachel cut his flowers would get me into some trouble. I wouldn't be surprised if his eyes watered when he saw his blossoms missing. "Cut five," I insisted. "An odd number looks better."

"Okay." Rachel made the last cut. Even with one eye keeping watch on the front door I enjoyed hearing the snap as the metal blades met. It was Mother's Day, but my mother was gone. I blamed my father for making her want to leave. He took something from me. With the flowers, Rachel and I could take something of his.

When we returned the shears, Rachel convinced me to take a vase from the garage storage cabinet so she'd have something nice to put the flowers in. We picked a plain glass one—something cheap—and returned to Rachel's house to fill it with water. After we gave Jacklyn the bouquet (she smiled, hugged us, and returned to bed with the dog), we hung out in Rachel's room. We each drank a beer (Jacklyn never seemed to notice) while we worked on our oral reports for social studies. I'd chosen Deborah Sampson, and Rachel had chosen Helen Keller. The topic was: "A woman." During the Revolutionary War, Deborah Sampson dug a bullet out of her flank. Whatever a flank was. At the time I didn't know. Something female, evidently, because she couldn't have anyone else fix it up for fear that they would find out her sex, or gender, or sex? I wasn't even sure if Deborah fit the assignment. She

was sort of a man. But when I told my dad he got all excited, maybe confused. He raised his wine glass over a plate full of stir-fry: "Subvert, Bea! Subvert that silly system of signifiers!"

Rachel wasn't having any trouble. She had blazed through her three required reference books and made a poster with five main points. Nancy at the library had helped her find the Helen Keller movie, so Rachel had that to show clips of in class. I couldn't get through my book. I still didn't understand. In social studies we learned about war, that it was everywhere, that it was hell, that it made countries who they were. So why did the teacher suggest all these women civilians for our project? The Red Cross woman made sense because she was war-related, but people like Helen Keller--she had conquered squat. She hadn't given birth to a nation, but my father said people like Helen Keller elevated the human spirit.

The beer couldn't have been helping me. It made me worry. A Heineken--I didn't even know how to pronounce it--was supposed to ease a person's pain. I worried about school; the school year ended next week. High school loomed dangerously close. Even closer was the summer driver's ed class Rachel and I had signed up for. That was just two weeks away. I worried Rachel might not be my driving partner. And I worried my mother was lonely, that carved melons were her only companions, and even they had been elaborately staged. Even worse was the thought that my mother was happier without me, as blithe as she'd been four years ago, before Grand-mère came.

When Rachel finished her report we took the empty beer bottles to the garage. Then Rachel crawled onto her mother's bed. Jacklyn slept as a black and white melodrama played on the t.v. There was a lot of gasping and wide-eyed sighing. The actors seemed about to die, which was how Jacklyn sometimes acted. I found a seat on the floor where I could lean my back against the bed.

I woke up at 10:30, squinting into an infomercial. A man and a woman were trying to sell a sucker-pump that sucked the air out of, as they'd said, anything. They sucked air out of bags of food and bags of clothes. They laughed at each other's jokes, scripted jokes. I wondered, feeling mean from the beer and homework un-done, if they had been deprived of oxygen at some point in their lives.

My right arm was dappled with red carpet indentations where I'd fallen asleep on it. Jacklyn taught voice lessons at the University, and there was a framed poster for Madame Butterfly on her wall that I'd always admired. The heroine was colorful and geometric, but not cubist. I rubbed my arm. Rachel and Jacklyn slept, Luciano in bed with them. It looked like Rachel had kicked off one of the bed sheets. I thought about taking that sheet and curling up with it on the floor. But my father might worry and come looking for me. When I stood up I imagined tucking the three of them into bed, kissing them on the forehead, sighing. Even Jacklyn looked like a child as she slept. Instead, I locked the front door and climbed out through the window in the living room.

At home, I poured myself some orange juice. My mouth felt less like creek moss as I drank. I saw my father, asleep at his desk. His head snapped up when I looked. He wore guilt on his face and

streaks of red pen. He wanted me to think he was a paragon of productivity. That was what he called it when Grand-mère was dying. He taught a double course-load then. Now my father's hair looked mushed on the top of his head, a smashed cup-cake. He patted his hand on the table, shifted papers. He was searching for his pen. "Bea?" Dad stumbled getting out of his chair. "Would you like it if we ate dinner?"

I poured the rest of the orange juice in my glass. "Huh? Dad, it's late." I slurped at the juice, even licked the inside of the glass as far as I could reach. The beer had made me thirsty.

"Oh. Yes, well, it is late. It would be very European of us to dine at this hour." He smiled the tired smile that made him look like a cute but unreal animal, something wearing a suit and staring in a children's television show. "You're not hungry?"

I didn't understand where this push to eat had come from.

"I can warm us a couple of yams," he said.

"I want to go to bed, Dad. Are you going to be okay?"

He didn't say anything for a minute. He found his pen. "I had a call from--"

"--Mother?"

"No. Oh, never mind. Something to discuss over pancakes." He scratched his chin. "Nothing to fuss over at this hour. We'll have breakfast, then--perhaps a pancake--in the morning?" He wanted to talk to me. I could see the guilt and longing wash over him; it wore him away as though he were made of soft stone. If it didn't hurt to look at him I would have pressed for more information, but I couldn't, not when he scratched his chin, slouched.

"Yep." I rinsed out my glass and went upstairs with my Deborah Sampson book and notebook paper. A pancake in the morning. What more could we want?

When I woke up I tried to feel where my flank might be. The sun was really coming in, so I pulled the blinds tighter. The way the book had described Deborah Sampson's bullet wound, I got the impression that the flank began near the butt area. Was a man's butt that different from a woman's butt? Wasn't the butt the back, the bottom? The ass? Everybody had an ass. Asses were the same. Rachel knew. But she reveled in her secrecy. Ass. My pajama shorts had twisted between my legs making it difficult to be sure of anything down there. I remembered that my father would be making pancakes and this seemed as good a reason as any to get out of bed.

My mother had called Grand-mère an ass.

I found the pair of jeans I'd worn yesterday crumpled next to my bed along with Deborah Sampson: Daughter of a Nation. I put on the jeans and found a blue t-shirt and my old skater shoes. Grand-mère had left trails of things "like a wild animal leaves shit." My mother had said to my father once. I used to clean up after her, carrying a plastic bag around the house, filling it with shredded

Kleenex and Cheerios, cut-out pictures of pianos, ovens, washers, and dryers from magazines. It was the kind of thing I had tried to clean up before my mother found it, and once I remember getting confused, thinking that I'd made the mess myself.

The water in my bathroom felt like ice on my face. It wouldn't warm no matter how long I let it run. I pulled my hair into a small ponytail and secured it with a rubber-band. I was Deborah Sampson, flank, ass, and all.

It was almost a week later before my father really made pancakes; we still hadn't talked about the phone call. I thought it must have been my mother, but pressing him for information only made him neurotic—that I'd learned. I had to be patient, anticipate nothing. My father did, however, apologize for not taking me to the Mother's Day concert at the University. He reminded me that we'd gone several years ago, and I'd wet my pants during the final movement of le Sacre du printemps. He reminded me that last year we'd had two mothers living in our house and this year we had none.

He wore a navy apron, his most recent thank you gift from the public television station. My father gestured with a metal spatula and announced that the very flapjacks he flipped were in honor of my last day of junior high. He brought one to my plate, returned to the griddle. As I ate it, I told Dad that Rachel would be sleeping over this evening. He looked down into his batter and nodded. Pancake batter flecked his beard. "Dad, wipe your beard before you go to class, okay?" If I didn't help him, who would?

"Oh?" He grabbed the dish towel from his shoulder and blotted his face. Probably too little too late—I was pretty sure that his students already thought him strange. They were reading Le Chartreuse de Parmes, and he'd told me that as he read passages aloud to the class he buckled with laughter. The students tended to look on with concern. When they didn't laugh, he assumed they were not keeping up with their reading. Oh, Dad.

Chapter 2

Rachel and I had similar births; six years old, we both witnessed a birth. As my father busied himself in his downstairs office, and my mother worked at the bank, I was showing Rachel my new puzzle (it had five hundred pieces!) in my bedroom. Though I wasn't particularly interested in showing her off, Rachel noticed my hamster, Caramel. Rachel said something was wrong. I looked over to the cage to see slick bits, pink and wiggly, coming out of Caramel's bottom. I thought her organs were falling out; Rachel said they were babies. Forever, we stood there watching. Eventually, I sat down on my bed, but Rachel had frozen. She'd counted seven babies, the smallest squiggling the most. But there would only be six, because Caramel began to eat the runt.

I refused to look. Caramel had been a gift from my mom's sister, Aunt Kathy, and I was still sort of afraid of animals. "Let's go downstairs," I said. But Rachel wouldn't stop looking. She sat cross-legged on the floor, and even through her tears, she looked. It was September and we'd just become friends because we were both in Mrs. Seery's class. I'd only ever played with Rachel once before, and that had been at the Gainesville public park with other kids around.

When her crying lost momentum, she wiped her eyes with her shirt, swiped the back of her hand under her nose. I didn't move. I just let her do what she was doing, but while I did, I stewed. Even as a first grader, I stewed. Rachel's face had reddened and puffed—the splotches resembled my father's allergic reaction to penicillin the previous year. She ceased to make outright crying noises, but her breathing was shallow. I pretended to pick at a scab on my elbow while I watched her in my periphery. I'd had my back to the hamsters, and by the time I turned around again, there was no sign of the runt.

"Is there any blood in her whiskers?" Rachel asked.

I scrunched up my face. Rachel had approached the cage, and now her nose hovered just inches away from the metal bars. "When I eat," she started to giggle. "I get food on my face."

I took Rachel's arm. I wanted her to leave my house; I didn't want to invite her over ever again. And yet, I knew I needed to keep an eye on this girl. Really, it was the baby hamsters I needed to get rid of—so pink and wiggly—no bigger than an Easter jelly bean. I hoped we could take them back to the pet store. I imagined my father placing them, one by one, in a zip lock baggie. I would have to remind him to poke an air hole.

My mother whooped and clasped her hands together when she saw the babies that evening. Caramel sitting on top of all those babies. Rachel stayed for dinner, and I got nervous when she asked

my mother what we were having. Pasta salad. "Oh," Rachel said, her eyes darting back and forth in their sockets. I picked at my elbow in the silence. Remembering Rachel's question about Caramel's bloody whiskers, I was afraid. But she only said: "I like pasta salad. I've never had it before."

My mother made sure I invited Rachel over regularly so she could see the baby hamsters grow. Rachel was especially pleased when their fur came in. "When they get big enough," she said, "the kids will bite the Mom for eating their little sister."

Six weeks later when the hamsters no longer needed their mother, we sold five of them to the pet store for a dollar-fifty each. I was relieved—they'd made such awful noises at night, so much squeaking, rustling, and gnawing that I couldn't sleep. My mother gave Rachel one of the hamsters. She named it Hammie (short for Ham-bone). She liked to keep it outside its cage and often paraded around with it on her shoulder. According to the story, the rodent was perched up there when Luci bared his teeth. Hammie got nervous, Rachel said, and fell onto the tile floor. She brought it over to our house, and my mother pretended (I think) to listen for a heartbeat. Rachel hiccuped as she sobbed and, once my mother declared the hamster dead: "Hammie didn't make it, Sweetie." Rachel collapsed to our kitchen floor.

I watched my mother. She appeared as disturbed as I'd been during Rachel's reaction to the baby-eating. My mother wrapped Hammie in a paper towel printed with blue hearts. Then she set the death bundle on the kitchen table, on the placemat where my father usually ate (I hoped he wouldn't see). She got down on her hands and knees and took Rachel in her arms. Rachel was bigger than me, and it was weird to see my mother hold her. My mother stroked her hair until she stopped crying. "It's not your fault, Sweetie," she told Rachel. But there watching them, a snake of snot hanging from Rachel's nose, I thought it probably was.

*

Things disappeared around Rachel. My father once said that she made him nervous, that her presence would make clocks tick counter-clockwise, that her body heat would confuse the thermostat. "Here." In the kitchen after school, I handed Rachel a Diet Coke. I thought about taking one myself to celebrate the way that final school bell still rang in my ears, then didn't. Aspartame was an acquired taste, one I probably should have picked up from being around Rachel. I never did, though, and my father would say: "For the best, Bea, it's for the best."

"Any pickles in there?" Rachel asked, indicating the fridge with her soda can. Rachel had hoisted herself onto the counter. She kicked her leg out and back. It made a thud and possibly a shoe mark on the wood.

Rachel hadn't been eating real food lately, but it didn't seem like she needed to. Sometimes I thought my best friend could operate outside the laws of mortals. "Pickles..." I could usually locate foods in my own home, but lately, my father had been putting things in funny places. I found figs in the butter hutch; the butter had been left on the table. He said he wanted it to soften. Well, it looked slick and wet when I brought my knife to the stick, and it frightened me to feel something give so easily under my hand. "I can't find any pickles, Rachel."

"I'll ask your dad." She hopped off the counter and beat me to the doorway.

"I can ask him." I pushed ahead of her. "It would be weird if you asked."

"Whatever."

Rachel and I found my father sitting in his home office. He used the card table for grading student papers; he wanted to keep his mahogany desk pristine. When he saw Rachel, my father pushed his books to the end of his desk--an attempt to build a fortress to protect him from Rachel.

"Mr. B!"

My father peered over his glasses, hoping to look professorial, aloof. "Young Rachel in the flesh. How may I help you?"

"Nothing, Dad, I just need to know if we have any pickles," I said.

"Pickles? I don't suppose we do. Though we'll soon have a nice crop of cucumbers!" That was that then. "Sorry, Rachel--"

"--Mr. B, I have a favor to ask." Rachel brushed a wisp of hair from her eyes. "Actually, you'd be helping my mom." I watched her closely.

"Ah, Jacklyn," my father said.

I watched Rachel picked up a book about Louise Colet. "Looks like a good book here, Mr. B." She smacked the cover with her palm then put it down. She knew she was full of shit, and it would have been funny if I wasn't bracing for this surprise favor.

"Well, we've got some stuff growing in our lawn, Mr B. My mom thinks we should kill it before somebody tries to smoke it."

"Your mother has quite the sense of humor."

Bird gurglings erupted in the room. The sound seemed to come from the walls themselves rather than a particular source. Rachel bolted back around the desk and stood next to me; for an instant I felt protective of her. We had recently seen the Hitchcock classic. "Jeez, Mr. B. You trying to scare someone to death with that noise?"

It was the chirping mechanism of my father's Audubon Society clock. Grand-mère had made her son a member three years ago when she first came to live with us. The noise had driven my mother nutty.

"Oh Rachel, I only kill weeds." My father made his nostrils flare out when he spoke to Rachel. "Now tell me, what might this weed look like?"

"Like a weed. Weedy."

"My, but we're a budding naturalist! Any other observations you'd like to share?" He flared his nostrils and tended to be rude. Rachel was smarter than he thought.

"You're a hoot, Mr. B."

"How good of you to see it that way."

I refused to let them banter: "Dad, you know you're not funny at all."

"Sure he is, Bea." Rachel ruffled my hair, and I squirmed away. "Okay, Mr. B., my mom's home. She told me to send you over."

"If you insist."

"Yeah. Thanks." Rachel grabbed my sleeve and galloped away. I didn't understand why she didn't tell me her mom wanted my dad's help, and I couldn't believe he'd agreed to interrupt his work so easily. My father left right then. He went over to see Rachel's mother, which, as far as I knew, he hadn't done since the night I was sick and he'd come to fetch me, calling me his poor chameleon because I'd turned as yellow as the Tupperware barf bowl I'd been clinging to.

"Get me another Diet Coke, 'kay, Bea?" Rachel had hoisted herself onto the kitchen counter again. I grabbed another drink out of the refrigerator. "I didn't think your mom cared about weeds."

"Thanks, Bea." She took the can, pressed it against her forehead. "You know, I guess there's just some really bad ones in back. I don't know." Rachel opened her drink and gulped. "Sometimes the bubbles sting my throat," she said. "Let's do something else, Bea. Let's go up to your room." Rachel hopped down from the counter. Her shirt had bunched up, and I saw an inch of her skin.

We climbed the stairs. Mine was the only two-story house on the block. That fact had made me popular in fifth grade when kids wanted to come over and see what it was like to have an upstairs. Not much different from a one-story house, except that after we visited Cape Canaveral, Rachel and I pretended that the downstairs was a space-shuttle command center and the upstairs was the shuttle hurtling into outer space. The second floor inspired us, made us feel closer to the stars.

My father had wanted to move out of this house a few months before Grand-mère died. He regarded those stairs as a curse; Grand-mère couldn't climb them. I remember telling my mother that I was glad we didn't move since Grand-mère died anyway. Grand-mère had taken enough away from us. Even if she would have lived twenty more years, I would have refused to move; I didn't want to leave Rachel.

Upstairs, Rachel went into my room, and I used the bathroom. When I returned to the bedroom I found Rachel facing my closet, her arms swallowed by clothes. Two of my shirts lay crumpled on the carpet. On top of the pink one I'd worn to see The Moscow Ballet last year, rested a pair of fabric

shears, almost like they were being cradled in a nest. Rachel turned around, a blue sweater balled under her arm.

"Didn't you bring any clothing of your own to work on?" I picked up the scissors and put them on my desk. They belonged to my mother, and Rachel must have found them in my mother's room. When had Rachel found time to open closed doors and search through my mother's desk? There were things of my mother's that I didn't touch, and it frightened me that Rachel would use an absent person's property so easily.

"Bea," Rachel flipped her hair back. That was something girls did in music videos. "I thought you were serious about looking good for summer parties." Rachel looked like a fish when she tossed her hair like that. She looked like she was flopping around in all the wrong places.

"You've taken everything I own out of the closet." I picked up a sweater and lay it on the bed, smoothed it out and folded one arm, then the other, like they did at the mall.

"Don't get all worked up," Rachel said, dropping the other clothes on the bed. "We probably only have time for one anyway." She looked at them all, the clumps of clothing among my stuffed animals, and held up a green shirt with a small daisy pattern on it. "How about this?"

I nodded and put on a sweatshirt, cold. I should have asked Rachel where she found the scissors. The blue sky outside had turned into a wash of black, and the darkness made me tired. Instead I closed the blinds.

"Bea, we're gonna be sexy bitches." Rachel put a cd in the player. A guitar, maybe two, with drums, scorched the air, probably to accompany the transformation into a sexy bitch. "Do you want to do the cutting?" Rachel had picked up the scissors and pointed the blade at me.

"Yep." I continued to nod until I gripped the scissors in my left hand. We cleared the bed of pillows, two stuffed polar bears and clothes. My room had old blue carpet, and now it looked walked-over and wavy. Not something I could count on. I feared my stuffed bears might sink into the floor.

"Put down the scissors, Bea. Let me measure you." Rachel grabbed the scissors and set them down on the bed. She grabbed both my arms at the wrists and raised them into a T. "Stay still." Rachel had ribbon tied around her wrist (a new fashion that Lilly, belle of the junior high, had introduced), and strained to un-tie the knot she'd made. After she unfurled the shiny green length of it, she held the ends of the ribbon in her hands and spread her arms out wide. "Keep your arms up! Up darling, up!" Rachel feigned exasperation.

"Yuck, Rachel!" The ribbon was wet on both ends from when she'd worked on it with her teeth. "What are you going to do with these measurements."

"Build a life-size, robotic Bea Bouvier." Rachel stuck her tongue out.

"Fine with me. Fool my dad with it and I'll go live at sea." I flapped my arms like a bird.

"I'll be a seagull." I saw Rachel's face and stopped flapping. I regretted having flapped at all.

"Dork." Rachel began to mark the shirt--the raw material--with her ribbon and an orange crayon she fished out of her pocket. "I'll show you where to cut."

"What?"

"I'll let you do the cutting, she said. "That way you can't blame me if it's messed up." Rachel riffled through her backpack until she found several folded up pages of a magazine. "Here."

"What's this?" I took the magazine pages.

"Stylish."

A woman with curly blond hair leaned into the starboard of a motor boat. She wore aviator glasses, green ones that reflected the ocean.

"This is what we're gonna do. It's Prada."

I held my mother's scissors while the blades chewed the fabric. They weren't sharp enough. I cut four inches and then gave them to Rachel. Somewhere my mother must have left behind a sharper pair. She'd left lots of sharp things. She left her razor in the shower, and Dad had said that meant she wasn't going to have any fun on the ship. Wasn't it the *fun ship*? He'd stomped his foot and belted into the receiver. I knew he was talking to my mother when he talked standing up. He liked to have something to do when he talked to her. I had even seen him sweeping the floor with one hand. If nothing else, he jingled the change in his pants pocket.

Rachel cut out the front of the shirt. The back was mostly gone too. Empty arms remained, an abandoned puppet show. "Voila! Sleeves!" Rachel twirled around. "Less is more, Bea."

I could not imagine what was supposed to fill out that fabric, although it seemed as though Rachel did. I could read her eyes for a moment, the gleam of pleasure in them, and I felt as horrified as I had when I'd first seen Rachel's hand behind the gleam on the blades of my mother's shears.

"Here! Try it on!"

Rachel shoved what used to be the green shirt I had once worn under a khaki jumper to my piano recital at me. I couldn't take it from her; the room seemed to be rolling backwards, and I thought I might fall if I moved.

"Jesus, Bea," Rachel grabbed my left arm and shoved it in one sleeve. She grabbed my other arm, her thumbnail digging into the inside of my wrist. "Let's get you to a mirror." Rachel acted like a current behind me, washing me out through the doorway of my room, into the hall and to the bathroom with the yellow ducks on the wallpaper.

"I look awful." The thing was too small or something--the shirt I wore underneath had bunched and rolled, making mounds under the disaster Rachel had forced onto my body.

"Don't be silly." Rachel was looking at me until she noticed a hair brush next to the sink. She picked it up and began brushing her hair.

“This *is* silly.” I gestured at my reflection. “I’m being realistic.” Wiggling violently, I struggled to pull my arms out, panting a little when I’d finally freed myself. As Rachel brushed her hair, I noticed the apple-blossom smell of her shampoo. “Here,” I handed her the ruined piece of clothing.

Sighing, Rachel slipped it on easily. Her shoulders weren’t broad like mine. The “sleeves,” as she called them, looked okay on her. I kept looking until I decided that they maybe even looked good on her. She wore a tight tank top underneath, so there wasn’t any bunching like there had been with my t-shirt. And a person couldn’t help noticing her breasts; they were just there in the same way mine weren’t.

“Maybe I should keep it. I’ll give you something the next time we’re at my house.” Rachel turned in front of the mirror, and she did this thing that she’d been doing for years: she flared her nostrils while sucking in her cheeks, her mirror face. She didn’t look good anymore. I started to notice the wavy edges of the fabric, chewed and uneven. It looked better on her, but it still looked awful. I would have told her this except she seemed so far away, right there next to me in my tiny bathroom with the ducks swimming along the wallpaper border over our heads.

When my father returned about an hour later, Rachel pointed out that he had dirt on the fly of his pants. I saw it too, but I wouldn’t have said anything. Muddy fingerprints, strange for a man who did laundry twice weekly and made frequent trips to the dry cleaners. My father blushed behind his beard when Rachel asked about his soiled slacks. He replied that the bathroom at Rachel’s house smelled pink, like a rose. I hated the way he spoke sometimes, the way he said nothing with so many words. We still hadn’t talked about the phone call he’d received on Mother’s Day, and I refused to imagine what kind of weeds he’d encountered at Rachel’s house. Now I didn’t even want to look at him. Until he changed his pants, I couldn’t.

Rachel had spent the night, but we both got up early for five-hour shifts at our respective jobs. I had almost been glad to part with Rachel in the morning—she’d drunk so many Diet Cokes she hadn’t slept at all. When I woke up she’d cut two more of my shirts. I was lucky to have a soothing job in the library.

It was an easy shift: I’d shelved books, checked books in. For the last forty minutes, I’d been shelf-reading, checking to make sure the books were in the right order. They never were, and it took me a month to learn that. Even when we thought we had them lined-up with their collective spines flush across the shelf, something threatened the perfection. I had begun to feel like the leader of a nation of books, a dictator. The last job I wanted was one of a dictator. Napoleon had been poisoned with wallpaper paste. That sounded like something that would happen to my father, only his poison would be

the plant-food chemicals. We could dig up Napoleon's body and it would be perfectly preserved, no worms. When I was dead I wanted worms. I was part of the proletariat and accepted imperfections. They were not threatening but lovely. In that spirit, I gave up shelf-reading for the day and went to sit down in the children's corner with the bear, Mr. Beasley.

I knew that soon Rachel would be coming to the library to get me. She wanted to go to Lilly's pool party, but I didn't want to swim. Neither did Rachel, for that matter. She just wanted to tan her middle in one of Lilly's mother's matching lawn-chairs. I'd seen the lawn chairs before when Lilly had invited Rachel and me over. They were the those blue loungers with the yellow trim and a plastic daisy glued where your head should be. I didn't want to take a dip, and I didn't want to lounge with a daisy. But Rachel appeared in the children's corner of the library with a mesh beach bag on her shoulder and flip-flops, the color of Lilly's mother's chairs, on her feet.

"I saw Nancy at circulation, she said you could go." Rachel leaned down and grabbed my wrist.

"Go where?" I made my arm dead weight. Rachel flopped it around. I squinted at her.

"Lilly's. Where the water's warm and the boys are blue...or the boys are warm and the water's blue." She squeezed my hand, pleased with her wit.

"The water is cold, the bottom of the pool is painted blue, and the boys suck."

As Rachel used her other hand to dislodge me from Mr. Beasley's warm embrace, her bag swung down from her shoulder and hit me in the ear. I said nothing.

"Sorry, Bea." Rachel put her bag down, and I saw a Cosmo inside. She sat on Mr. Beasley's paw. "Bea--"

"--What." I hadn't been reading, just thinking, spending time with Mr. Beasley. I pulled his paw out from under her butt.

"Bea, don't suck." Rachel turned and looked Mr. Beasley in the eyes. She took his paw and used it to pat me on the head. "We don't have to stay all afternoon."

When we got to the door, Lilly's mom answered. Before she'd had the third baby, she'd been the Avon lady. My mother had gone to an Avon event party and ordered me glitter lotion which I wound up hating. The glitters were square, big and thick. When I rubbed it on my arms the glitter cut into my skin and made the lotion sting.

"Hello girls!"

I knew there would be family pictures and embroideries hanging on the walls. The pictures radiated around each other, and I found myself standing next to a set of them showing Lilly from baby to middle-schooler, her eighth grade picture huge in the center. Her lips appeared to be bleeding, but that

was just lip gloss. Lilly had given Rachel a small copy of the bloody lip pics. On the back she'd written: "Friends forever! Let's hang out tons this summer!" Over my dead body.

"Some of the others are already out back." Mrs. Connor touched Rachel's back, and we both smiled when we greeted her. Mrs. Connor kept her hand on Rachel's back, between her shoulder blades, and she led us all the way to the pool deck where the daisy lounges were lined up and waiting like pastry-puffs at a dinner party.

"Thanks, Mrs. Connor." Rachel had hardly put her bag down on a daisy lounge before Lilly pounced.

"Raaaaaaachel!"

The two of them looked like twins: their lanky arms tangled around each other's trunks, and I couldn't decide if their movements were awkward or somehow stylish. I knew I wasn't the best judge of those things. I sat down on the daisy chair.

"Lilly-Pie! The pool looks so cute!"

"Yeah, my mom found those inflatable lily pads for me last week. She thought I had to have them, you know?" Lilly turned to me, looked down at my shoes, my clothes, and stopped smiling. "Hi Bea." Seeing Lilly above me like that, wearing her halter top and bikini bottoms, I praised the divine that I hadn't brought my suit. I would not go there. Into that pool.

"Hi Lilly." I would not even dip my toes from the deck.

Rachel wanted a Diet Coke. She followed Lilly to the buffet table where it appeared that nearly every kid wanted refreshments. The buffet table was more crowded than the water. I remembered that Lilly had a fish tank. For house pets, that was as far as it went. For this I liked her even less. Not so much because her family neglected to care for anything furry (for all I knew, Dad or Brother was allergic), but because it meant that I couldn't busy myself with a dog or cat. It meant I couldn't sneak inside to pass the time with something cuddly while Rachel and Lilly and the mostly popular part of the eighth grade shoved cheese puffs into their mouths.

Then again, maybe we weren't the popular part of the eighth grade. I knew I wasn't, but it only half-occurred to me that these kids weren't either. After all, this was a fully-chaperoned afternoon pool party with Cokes and Chees-its. I'd had an ex-babysitter who'd told me stories of sex in pools. Here, only Morris Glover soaked in the pool, and he still had a mouth full of braces. Though he did play the guitar. My father said that the boys who played the instruments had the higher sex-drives. Sublimation, he said, and I tried not to listen.

"I didn't bring my suit either." Shannon Clark had waddled over to me. Her complexion seemed to match the overcast sky in a way that I didn't think was supposed to happen to anyone under forty.

"Hey Shannon. How's your summer?" I said.

"It's okay, I guess. But I never got my yearbook." Shannon tried to sit down on the end of my daisy lounge, but we both felt the thing shudder and she lowered to the deck, cross-legged.

"You should be thankful. You won't waste any of your adult life pouring over the shit memories." I'd overheard my father say something like that once.

"You sound upset, Bea."

"I forgot my swimming suit." We smiled at each other.

"So. Huh. Is Rachel with James?" Shannon rolled her sleeves up to her shoulder.

"They broke up." I tugged at my pant legs. Shannon knew about the break-up---she just needed something to say to me.

"Oh. Sorry, I guess." She rolled her sleeves down again.

"Yeah. Whatever." James had been popular. And Rachel had been with James from Valentine's Day through Easter. I remembered that because Rachel talked about eating a lamb cake at his house--a weird Easter dessert shaped like a fluffy, white lamb--she'd eaten the lamb's entire head and part of its shoulder. She called it an obscene amount of frosting. And that was the weekend a custodian found the dead kid in the pool.

"Where is she if she's not with James?"

"Huh." Shannon was hard to listen to. She had a doughy, transparent quality, not just her skin. Yet among giggling and shrieking of teens, I knew Shannon was probably the most earnest. She'd probably been a longtime friend of Lilly's. Lilly's mother probably made Lilly invite Shannon to the house every other week because Shannon was a good girl and knew nothing of flanks.

"I'm going to get a Coke," Shannon finally said.

Everyone knew that James and Rachel had split. There was a quote about it in the Orange Groves yearbook. Although Shannon said she didn't get one of those. I needed a beach towel. My arms were turning up goose-bumps. There was a stack of towels a few yards away from me, but I didn't feel like getting up. I planned to sit there in that semi-reclining position for the duration of the party. I could watch people and hope that no one talked to me.

My first discovery was that Lilly's mother had varicose veins running down her legs, but you had to stare very hard to see them. I thought of an infomercial Rachel and I had watched a couple of months ago: two ladies wearing doctors' coats were selling body make-up. The brunette said the make-up could be used for people with medical skin disorders, and the blonde reminded her that all the Hollywood movie stars used the make-up to achieve their flawless look behind the camera. I decided that Mrs. Connor used the body make-up.

It was turning out to be a wretched day for a pool party. The sky faltered and fell dark, making the surface of the swimming pool reflect the color of a dull stone. Not even Morris Glover dared to swim now.

Girls shrieked at the first raindrops. A drop hit me between the eyes, and the manifest dreariness almost cheered me, except I knew it meant I would have to get up from my chair. Mr. Connor, a hulk of a man who sold real estate, appeared wearing a powder blue polo shirt. He took the cooler inside and came back for the seven layer dip and a bag of corn chips. It was too much to hope for that the Connors would disband the party early on account of the rain. Instead, Mrs. Connor ushered everyone into the basement rec room where there was a pinball machine, a bumper pool table, and a big screen t.v.

I found a bean bag by the television where I could park myself for good. Once I got settled I noticed that Rachel and Lilly were not among the party-goers anymore. Neither was Shannon, for that matter. I waited, was hit by a flurry of popcorn, and decided to leave my post in case the food fight escalated. Lilly's room was up the flight of stairs, through the dining room, and past the master bedroom. The Connor house had an unusual amount of white wicker furniture. There was nothing tackier than white wicker furniture. Lilly's bedroom was empty, no Rachel. But from the bedroom I heard voices that I traced to a bathroom with a partially closed door. I pushed it open without knocking.

"Hi, Bea." Shannon greeted me through a mask of make-up.

"Hi." Lilly and Rachel were giving Shannon a make-over. I had never seen so much eye shadow, lipstick, and rouge outside of a drugstore, but that was what Lilly got for being the daughter of a former Avon lady. Shannon looked like a drag queen. The skin around her eye sockets was blue and green, like someone with two technicolor shiners.

"We're almost done with the make-up." That said, Rachel assaulted Shannon's face with a powder puff. I sneezed.

"Perfection." Lilly admired what they'd done. "Alright, Shannon, for the next part you're going to have to close your eyes."

"Um, okay." Shannon glanced over at me, as though I should give her the go ahead, but I just shrugged.

"We can't use a blindfold because we might ruin your make-up," Rachel said.

"You have to close your eyes very tight because you don't want us to have to use a blindfold, right, Shannon?" The pitch of Lilly's voice matched Rachel's perfectly.

"Okay." Shannon squeezed her eyes shut. They turned her chair away from the mirror.

Rachel brushed Shannon's blonde hair and fastened it into a ponytail. "What pretty hair you have, Shannon." Rachel rolled her eyes.

"Thank you. My mom said I can get highlights in it before high school starts. She has a friend who works at the beauty school."

"Wow for you!" Lilly handed Rachel the scissors.

It was easy to guess what came next. And although I wished I would have said something, I liked the grinding snip of hair between the blades. Rachel was cutting off the ponytail above the elastic band.

“What are you doing to my hair?” Shannon shrieked and reached back for her ponytail. Her fingers got in the way of Rachel’s scissors; she screamed: “MRS. CONNOR!” Shannon’s doughy hand bled bright blood. Lilly recoiled.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay. Get a band-aid for her, Lilly.” Rachel tried to keep Shannon quiet.

“Gross, gross, eww. The first-aid kit is in my parents’ bathroom.”

“MRS. CONNOR!” Shannon had stuffed her hand in her mouth and was sucking on the wound. When Lilly’s mom finally came into the bathroom, Shannon looked like a vampire, blood dripping around her lips.

“What happened, girls!?”

“Shannon cut herself with the scissor.” Rachel hugged Shannon. “You’ll be okay,” she said sweetly.

“Shannon! Oh, my. Let me get the first aid kit. Lennard! I need you to help me with something!” Mrs. Connor left the bathroom.

“Yuck, Shannon, you bleed too much.” Lilly stuck her tongue out. “That’s gross that you’re drinking your blood.”

“You ruined your haircut, Shannon. We were trying to help you be pretty.”

“I didn’t cut myself!”

I couldn’t watch anymore. Shannon was crying and slobbering all over, her face a disgusting rainbow of make-up and blood. Rachel and Lilly made me sick. Worse, I made myself sick; I had been quite entertained by the whole production up until Mrs. Connor had stepped onto the stage. I went into the living room and sat on a white wicker chair by a window. The rain had softened into a patter. I heard Shannon crying and Mr. and Mrs. Connor arguing about whether the wound needed stitches. Mr. Connor finally decided to take Shannon to the hospital; he made Lilly come too. I watched the parade of them: Mr. Connor, Shannon and Lilly, as they left the house, Lilly trudging, languidly behind, as though she were meeting her doom.

Without Lilly, Rachel had no reason to stay at the party. She found a matching wicker chair across from mine and sat down. I didn’t look directly at her, but still I could see the wet spot on her shirt where Shannon had bled and Rachel had tried to get it out with soap and water from Lilly’s bathroom.

“I didn’t know you hated Shannon.” My voice came out flat.

“She’s a spaz.” Rachel shook a flip flop off of her foot. “I don’t hate her.”

“Does Lilly?”

“I don’t know.” Rachel looked around at the room, and I saw her eyes linger at a painting I hadn’t before noticed. It was a landscape three times as wide as it was tall, a blanket of trees over hills. “Let’s go.” Rachel grimaced at the painting.

I wanted to call Jacklyn to pick us up, but using the phone would require permission from Mrs. Connor, I supposed, and I didn’t want to have another encounter. We just left. As we walked home, Rachel told me that she hadn’t meant to cut Shannon. I looked down at my own hands, my skin a gentle purple, wet, under the evening sky and the faintly falling rain. Of course she hadn’t meant to cut Shannon; I knew Rachel had no reason to hurt Shannon. Rachel walked with her shoulders slumped, but as we neared the gas station she straightened, told me to wait.

I stood under an awning and watched a man with stuffed bears suctioned-cupped to the windows of his station wagon try to use the pay-at-the-pump. He would put in his card and then try to pull out the gas nozzle, but something wasn’t coordinating properly and he finally swore and went inside. By the time he came out again, Rachel had found three cigarettes in the top of the ash-tray garbage can. She avoided any with lipstick rings because she thought women’s mouths were dirtier than men’s. But I thought the opposite. She showed me her findings, tucked them in her back pocket and we started home again.

“Lilly’s in our driver’s ed class.” Rachel said.

“Super.” She wanted to talk to me now. She was finished with being sulky and distant. The easy change enraged me.

“Her brother took it a couple of years ago. He said it sucks.”

“Great.”

“Just that it’s boring. But some of the filmstrips are cool.”

“Wow.” I wanted her to shut up about what driver’s ed, Lilly, and her brother.

“Bea, you’re supposed to be excited about getting a driver’s license early. It will be wicked fun to go around without our parents.” Rachel pinched the gum she’d been chewing and pulled a string of it from between her teeth. She let it swing out of her mouth before tossing it into a grassy patch by the street corner.

“That’s what we’re doing now, Rachel.” I stopped, grabbed her by the wrist. “We’re going around without our parents.” She jerked her arm, but I held it, just long enough to frighten both of us. Her pulse ran under my fingers like a warning. This, now, was as free as it got. I didn’t want the future; I feared that if the future brought control of a two-thousand pound motor-vehicle, life might just get more and more twisted, splintered. And I couldn’t even trust my best friend with a pair of scissors.

“Bea, sometimes I forget how sweet you are.”

I wanted badly to hate Rachel. Or not to need her so much. I tried to think of something to say, something that would make her realize I was much cooler than anybody in Lilly's family, but it was easier to worry about a problem than try to fix it. We walked in silence until Rachel asked me for gum. I often provided her with it, and she counted on my father buying Trident in bulk. I dug a pack out of my pocket and gave her two pieces. I wondered if she'd eat anything else that night.

Chapter 3

I had known my mother was leaving because I had begun to hear dogs barking in the middle of the night. The neighborhood dogs were the first to know when something was amiss, and they woke me up three nights in a row before I put it all together: the dogs, the engine of her car, my mother sleeping until noon. Some nights she stayed, but once I understood that she left, I wondered if there was anything that kept her coming back.

Wherever it was that she went, I wanted to go too. And one night I did. Once my parents had retired to their bedroom, I stayed downstairs on the couch. We had rented three videos, and I feigned an intense resolve to watch them all: *Blue*, *White* and *Red*, in a six hour marathon with nothing but a pitcher of lemonade and the luscious cinematography to keep me alert. After *Blue*, I thought about scrapping everything and hitting the hay. Human existence was too packed full of disappointment and deception for me to think that one night of stealing away in my mother's station wagon could mend the dissolution of our family. But I couldn't move. My brain had become a plastic water toy: a plexiglas cube in which oily turquoise-colored liquid made waves. The plastic fish splooshing back and forth was my well-intentioned spirit. I, Bea, couldn't move, but my spirit splashed about. To get to my bed I would have to climb the stairs. Not only that, I would have to brush my sugar-bathed teeth. And wash my face if I really wanted to be thorough about the bedtime routine. Sleeping in the backseat of the station wagon seemed less effort than my alternative. And, I hoped, the heady bath of French existentialist thought that had washed over me might dissipate once I crawled into the back seat and smelled the vinyl upholstery against my cheek, a smell I thought would bring back many childhood memories in some of their happier incarnations.

The car swaddled me in stuffy heat. I'd been wearing a green tank top and blue terrycloth pants, but I decided to ditch the pants within moments of settling in the back seat. The pants made a good pillow; my cheek against vinyl had turned out to be too unpleasant evoke anything but annoyance. There I was in the car in the garage. I sat up. My mother had left a pair of plastic sandals on the floor in the back seat. There was sand on the floor, too. But that was the last I remembered, maybe due to oxygen deprivation—I hadn't thought about needing extra air.

My mother was a horrible driver; I woke up on the floor of the car. I had hoped to wake up when she got in the car, not while we were on the road. My bladder stung with lemonade bloat; every bump bringing me closer to peeing. I wasn't wearing any pants. I had taken off my pants and now with the A/C streaming, I had goosebumps everywhere I had skin.

My bladder pulsed; I envisioned it bursting. I clenched my legs together and tried to ignore the sensation that was verging on intense pain. I felt the sand against my legs. The particles danced as we drove over uneven road. I pictured my bladder vibrating, stretching. Briefly, I put my palm against my abdomen the way I'd seen pregnant women touch their bodies, but any pressure intensified the feeling.

I told myself to keep clenching, press my thighs together harder. Impervious, I had to be impervious. Distract myself. What was my mother doing? Where was she going? Was she meeting someone? I didn't think she had a lover; people in love were supposed to have flushed cheeks, dewy skin, and bright eyes. Love made one's voice lilt. When my mother spoke it made my own throat feel dry. And her eyes were not bright. The pain in my belly was bright.

Mommy.

The hot liquid ran down my thigh as though someone squeezed a warm lemon onto my skin. I found a wad of drive-through napkins under the seat, and I stuffed them against the puddle forming under my left hip. I bit my lip—hard. I wanted to punch the floor and punch the seats, but I felt as potent as a penguin. The bright smell of my piss was rising, and soon my mother would smell something strange. The air conditioning would circulate the stink of the baby in the back seat, and my mother would probably crash the car. She wouldn't wonder why an un-toilet trained child would be in the back seat of her car; she would just crash. We would be dead.

How bad was dead?

Grand-mère was dead, and she seemed better off for it. We all were. I had thought about death before, but in the back seat of the car, in a puddle of my own fluids, I managed startling profundity. I realized that I had a choice in the matter. If I wanted, I could very well open the door and jump out. Depending where we were (I had no idea), and how fast we were going (fast, fast), and the density of traffic (the road sounded lonely, but even so), I could die.

My mother coughed. She coughed a cough that sounded like "rabbit." She didn't want me to die. She'd have to be a sociopath to want me to die. Nobody wanted their child to die first. Except maybe the people on airplanes who made up that rule about adults fixing their own oxygen masks before helping small children with theirs. I'd been suspicious of that rule since I was nine. Besides the airplane policy, I'd heard of mercy killings. People, usually poor, disenfranchised people, sometimes killed their children so the child wouldn't have to live a horrible life. Hamsters did that too. "Rabbit," my mother coughed again, and then she put a tape into the car stereo.

Joni Mitchell. Songs are like tattoos...I didn't understand that line. My mother began to sing along. Jacklyn would have said she was flat. As my mother sang I felt a different embarrassment. It hurt that I was in the car with her, listening to her sing badly. Joni was my mother's favorite, and still my mother sang off key. The tape had more than one album on it, I think, because the music kept playing after I'd counted at least a dozen songs. I'd pulled my blue pants down to use as a blanket.

Clammy in my puddle of pee, I shivered and wondered how my mother could drive along, singing, without any idea that her daughter shivered in the back seat.

My seventh grade teacher that year had given birth to twins. Mrs. Wagner was full of information on the telepathic connection between mother and child. Mrs. Wagner had a lazy eye that prevented her from making clear eye contact with her students, but she more than made up for this with the enthusiasm she displayed during our unit on Newton's laws of gravity. She let students accompany her to roof of the school building to drop things. I remembered that Mrs. Wagner said mothers could smell their babies. Even their adult children. Mothers could pick out their child's bed sheets from the bed sheets of dozens of children. I wondered why my mother didn't smell me. Why? I wanted to ask Mrs. Wagner.

The car stopped and started. If we had been on the freeway, we weren't anymore. Dawn might have been breaking, or crumbling, because light started to ooze through the windows, so faintly that I only noticed because a bar of it illuminated my toes. When the engine killed the music, I knew we'd arrived. I popped my head up and my mother screamed.

"Oh my god, Bea." She was rocking and breathing, her hands clasped at her chest. I hadn't meant to pop my head up, not as non-chalantly as I had. But I'd been through a lot, and my hip had been cramping for the last five songs.

"I must be sleep-walking again, huh?"

"My heart hurts, Bea, that's how badly you scared me."

"Sorry." I held onto my pants. "I didn't mean to scare you." She didn't buy the sleep-walking, though I had experienced a bout of that a few years ago.

"Bea. You are a strange child."

"Where are we?" We were parked at the beach, I could clearly see. I wanted to know where she thought we were.

"I couldn't sleep." She looked curiously at me. "We might as well get out of the car."

I tried to put the pants on while she wasn't looking, but she caught me and came over to inspect the back seat.

"Is that urine?"

Clearly. Lying wasn't an option. "The bumps jostled my bladder. I used all the napkins I could find to dry off."

She opened the passenger's side door produced another wad of napkins from the glove compartment. "Don't put your pants on yet."

I nodded, sitting in the back with my legs hanging out of the car. My mother handed me half of the napkins. With the rest, she blotted my legs. She started with my right hip, so I worked on my left

ankle. I felt my shoulders slump and my belly stick out. I felt that I should have been more embarrassed as she touched me; I knew she wasn't there to meet anyone. "Thanks, Mom."

Once I was dressed and out of the car, the wind whipped my pants and sent icy shocks through my spine. My mother, seeing my bare shoulders hunched in the cold, took off her sweatshirt and handed it to me. "I forgot the blanket," she said, stepping back to the car. "Hell." She took off her shoes and put them in the trunk where she'd retrieved the blanket. Now we were both barefoot. "You didn't have any shoes to begin with, did you?" I shook my head.

We walked toward the ocean, then along the darkest part of the sand. Jellyfish had come up, a red tide that looked like bloody sanitary pads littered along the beach. I was careful not to step on them, but for all my care, I cut the fleshy part of my foot on a stone. The wet sand made it difficult to know whether or not I was bleeding.

We sat down after a while, further from the ocean so we wouldn't wet the blanket. I thought about leaning against my mother's shoulder. The way the water moved made it so unfriendly, lapping up against the sand, knowing that with persistence it could wear it away. I could not make my mother look at me, but I looked at her, her hair pulled back in a clip, a piece of it escaping and covering her left eye. Water should be clean. I wanted to wash myself in the water, wash the urine off of my legs, wash the skin off of my muscle and the muscle off of my bones. It smelled of dead fish, though, where we were at the beach. I couldn't trust that the water was clean. I had a keen nose and knew that nearby, something was dying.

"I'm unhappy, Bea."

All I could hear were the waves crashing and my mother's breathing. I'd tried to match my breath to hers.

"I'm leaving for now." She had found a piece of drift wood and was making cross-hatchings in the sand. I had to say something.

"Do what you need to do, Anne." That was what I said.

"Anne?"

"I don't want you to be sad," I said.

*

I never told my father the whole story; the story was mine. I said that I was still up watching movies when Mom came downstairs, that I went along with her. She told him that morning as little as she'd told me and was gone a week later. She didn't make us any extra casseroles to freeze, or pack us any lunches or anything like that. She left with a couple of suitcases and Dad and I found out later that she hadn't even told her parents. A stop at the bank and she'd been on her way.

My foot got infected at the cut. I had to take antibiotics and have it stitched up once the pus stopped oozing. Sea water was supposed to work as a cleansing agent. Nature's best bacteria basher. So much for that. At least it healed up in time for me to put on shoes last fall when I began eighth grade.

Chapter 4

Seeing Rachel with scissors at Lilly's party had upset me. Not just because she had cut Shannon, tried to hurt her for fun, but because every time I turned around Rachel wanted to cut something. A sensation of guilt began to fester and open inside me. But how had I been responsible? I'd been complicit, a word I'd learned from my mother when she'd described the way my father acted when Grand-mère threw her tantrums, but I hadn't incited anything. On the surface, I was innocent.

When she lived with us Grand-mère had often accused me of stealing her teeth. I'd stolen her teeth, her dressing gown, her pearl earrings that burned in a fire in 1949 (she'd even collected the insurance). These accusations didn't faze me nearly as much as the sunken skin under my mother's eyes. Since Grand-mère had moved in, my mother looked ten years older; she'd even let the five dollar haircuts place in the mini mall cut her blond hair into a jagged bob. A five dollar hair cut. My mother was not the kind of woman who tolerated a five dollar haircut. But Grand-mère had needed a haircut too; we'd gone to the mini-mall for her. But the people at the shop refused to cut her hair.

Grand-mère never went grey. Even on her deathbed (premature as it might have been), her brown hair gave a ruddy glow in the sunlight. Grand-mère had not been a woman to wear her hair in a bun, either. She'd lived in Paris, the thirteenth arrondissement; she'd taught French feminist philosophy at the experimental university, Paris VIII. Grand-mère had nursed espressos in the presence of Simone de Beauvoir, taught a course with Hélène Cixous. These things wouldn't have made much of an impression on me if my father hadn't sung them like the chorus in the song that was his mother's grandeur. Her intellect, scholarship, wit, his inheritance. He neglected to consider that my mother would inherit a broken marriage.

What bothered me about Grand-mère was the marionette. She'd bought a marionette for the ninth birthday of essayist Margot Renault's daughter, Charlotte. And I, just a child when we first visited Grand-mère abroad, found the marionette. It was one of the only things I remembered about Grand-mère's apartment. My mother, father, and I were all to sleep in the same room, in the same bed for the full two weeks of our visit. The marionette sat on the bureau, and I thought she was a gift waiting for me. I saw her with the blue and purple silk suit of a clown, curled brown locks, painted fingernails. I was six, and when Grand-mère and my parents retired to the *salle du séjour*, each sipping an *apéritif*, I stole away to the guest room, used a chair to reach the top of the bureau, and gathered the doll in my arms.

I carried her to Grand-mère. I wanted to say thank you. I'd already planned to name her Angela, decided she would perform in my circus. I would create a stage with painted brown boxes, make Angela dance.

When Grand-mère saw me she put down her drink, stopped the sing-song meditation that was her conversation voice, and stood up. "Qu'est que c'est ça, Beatrice?"

The doll was nearly as long as I was, and as I sensed Grand-mère's anger, I lost my balance. Grand-mère came toward us, Angela and me in a heap on the ground. I didn't know what to say, so I started to sing a rhyme from the record she'd given my father when I was a baby: "*Quelle heure est-il? Il est midi. Que te l'ait dit? La petite souris. Où donc est-elle? Dans la chapelle.*"

She scowled at me, snatched up the doll, and pulled at her tangled limbs. "Regards, toi! Regards ce que tu a fait?" But I kept singing: "*Et qui fait-elle? De la dentelle. Pour qui? Pour les dames de Paris qui portent un chapeau gris.*"

My accent held no water: my mother tongue, thickly American, spoke French like a sinking life-boat. She sent me into the room for the night even though we hadn't yet eaten dinner—a rabbit stew, I could smell it. My mother protested and later said she'd also thought the marionette a gift for me, but Grand-mère insisted I be punished for cheekiness. Now I believed she was really punishing me for an imperfect accent.

Grand-mère made me feel helpless. When she came to live with us she was supposed to be the helpless one. Sometimes I didn't feel sorry for her, despite her pain. I certainly didn't feel as sorry for Grand-mère as I did for my mother. Especially the day my mother tried to give Grand-mère the haircut. I returned home from school that day holding my paper maché penguin project. Judged best in the class by the students and teacher alike, I couldn't wait to share the news with my mother who'd helped me with the penguin—not as the creative architect her self, but more as a sous chef, tearing the pieces of newspaper, mixing new batches of water and flour paste. I'd gone out on a limb and painted the penguin's beak red, sunset red, though I knew people expected yellow beaks on birds. My mother surprised me with a shaker of red glitter; the beak popped even more.

When I opened the door Grand-mère was sitting on the steps as a child might wait for the favored parent to return. Her hair hung below her shoulder on one side, but on the other it sloped dangerously across her ear, jagged along her forehead. She took little notice of me and returned to what she'd apparently been doing: humming and writing in the carpet. She couldn't read or write now, but she made invisible marks on any surface she could, tracing dissertations with her left index finger. I didn't see it then, but she wore a generous smear of blood on her neck.

I should have noticed the blood or wondered about her hair. Instead, it occurred to me that with this paper mâché success under my belt, I could begin to experiment with strings. I could build elaborate stages and puppets, my girlhood fantasy, and this too I wanted to discuss with my mother. She

used to work at the bank, but now that she stayed home all day with Grand-mère, she should have extra time for me. I imagined ordering her to do the busywork: the brown cardboard box that I left in the morning would be green, rolling hills when I returned from school. She could cut the fabric for puppet costume designs. From the hallway to the kitchen I'd already imagined my own three-ring circus; I thought nothing of Grand-mère's grotesque coiffe.

The kitchen, empty, the living room, too, I hurried up the stairs, my penguin clasped against my chest. "Mom!" I didn't bother to catch my breath on the landing, "My penguin won, Mom!" I barreled into my parents' bedroom. My mother sat on the edge of the bed, her hand wrapped in a rag. Her eyes took on a sugary glaze, as though she'd abandoned her body. Grand-mère affected that stare on a daily basis. But my Mommy was not supposed to look like that. I stood there searching for signs of my mother. "Mom?" I went to her, dropping my penguin, her head just below mine as she sat. I kissed her blonde head as tears eeked from my eyes. My mother wasn't there, and it was the first time I felt my body hollow-out. I helped her to lie back on the bed. I took her wrist gently, unfurled the rag around her hand--just touching the cloth bloodied my fingers. It was a wet landscape, two planes of skin that didn't meet, and I knew she needed stitches from her thumb to her wrist. She had cut her hand in the process of cutting her mother-in-law's hair. Grand-mère had screamed and flailed even harder than when the haircut shop had refused her. The blood on Grand-mère's neck was my mother's.

My father left a department meeting to drive his wife to the hospital. I wanted to be in the car with them because he probably scolded her for being careless. I would have stood up for my mother. Instead, my father forced me to stay home with Grand-mère. But I didn't watch over her; I locked my door and posed my penguin on the dresser so he could watch over my bed.

After Lilly's party, I didn't see Rachel for three days. I busied myself at the library, viewed a Discovery Channel program about sharks. Still, I was bored and anxious. I'd been calling Rachel's house, and since nobody ever answered or called me back, it wasn't a stretch to imagine she was calling Lilly instead, to talk about Shannon's trip to the emergency room, or worse, to talk about what dorks Shannon and I were. I wanted to talk to someone about what a horrible person Lilly was, but Rachel was the only person I called. Just for a second, I entertained the idea that Rachel had cut herself with scissors and bled to death. I felt a mixture of shame, fear, and exhilaration. Then I called Rachel again.

Nobody answered; I decided to investigate. I heard music coming out of Rachel's house. Maria Callas. Jacklyn had told Rachel and me all about Maria, all about losing her talent and growing bitter to the world. Jacklyn said that Maria's voice was like a brilliant jewel, her body an empty setting when it was gone. I could picture this, because I had a ring, it had been my thirteenth birthday present, that broke. My birth stone had fallen out. The greenish waters of an aquamarine were nowhere to be found no matter how hard I searched.

I started to ring the doorbell, but the door pushed open; it hadn't even been completely closed. But the crimson rug had bunched up, hardened lava around the door, preventing it from opening all the way. I slipped through the narrow space like water through a crack. Luciano pattered over to me. He walked with such light steps it looked as though he was dancing an old world dance, a weird jig we had learned in music class. "Hey, Luci." I scratched his ears, and he grunted then sneezed repeatedly on my arm. I knew enough not to put my face too close to his. He kept on grunting--that was why so many people liked dogs, they were earnest about expressing pleasure.

"Where's Rachel, Lu? Show me, okay?" As soon as I stopped petting him, he nudged my hand with his snout. We weren't getting very far, yet the feel of his fur between my fingers made me realize how long it had been since I'd been over to Rachel's. The last time I'd spent the night, Luci had slept on my sleeping bag for almost an hour before retiring to Jacklyn's queen-sized bed. I remembered pretending he was my dog. My mother had said we could get a dog if Grand-mère didn't live with us. Animals scared Grand-mère; she believed they belonged outside the house. Even if a hamster lived in a cage with a wheel, a water bottle, a food dish and cedar chips, even if it had an obvious home in a girl's bedroom, Grand-mère thought it was supposed to be outside, outside, she said, where a mongoose would eat it.

Luci followed me as I walked toward Rachel's room. She wasn't napping, and her room was tidy, her bed smoothed and made. Then I heard, nestled inside the music, inside Maria's voice, Jacklyn singing. I heard Jacklyn's voice that she didn't ever want to share.

I missed Jacklyn. I hadn't seen her since Mother's Day, and then she had been mostly asleep. Except when she hugged me. When she hugged me her skin had been warm, hot even. Her cheek had pressed into mine and I'd felt her hair brush my neck. Jacklyn had long hair that flushed with reds when light hit her crown. Her hair could star in a commercial, the way it cascaded down her shoulders.

As she sang my belly tickled with fear. In the white house where every window was a bald eye, Jacklyn's voice kept me moving toward her. I just wanted to listen, to watch her mouth move, to know how the song aroused the delicate chords in her throat; that was all I wanted. Her voice made waves, and I deliberately walked toward her bedroom door. I'm not sure when I knew I shouldn't look, but I had to touch the white wall with three fingertips to keep myself from falling when I saw her. She had stepped, from several yards back, square in front of the door. Her naked body turned in a box of sunlight. Specs of dust sparkled around her bright flesh, and I saw her twice: before me and in the reflection of a large mirror. She twisted; in the mirror her eyes met mine perfectly, though I couldn't discern their color. I wanted them to be grey-green, like mine. I felt guilty and exhilarated, as though part of myself, maybe my soul, had been stolen through Jacklyn's eyes, her gaze, a mixture of compassion and spite.

I ran home only to discover I didn't want to be in my room. My father was at work, but I didn't want to be anywhere. I tried to dissolve into my bedspread, yet I felt my body weigh heavily against it. My mother wouldn't have liked that I'd gone into somebody's house uninvited. She hated that Grand-mère had just appeared on the doorstep one morning. Three years ago last April. I tried to pretend that my bed was a wooden raft, gently rocking me out to sea. My ceiling opened into a sky that was streaked with gulls. I fell asleep.

My father woke me up, his face too close to mine, asking me why I would nap in the middle of the day. To prove to him that I was fine, I agreed to go on errands with him. In the car, my legs stuck to the upholstery. Against skin, the plastic made my thighs sweat. My shorts were too short to stop it; I felt defenseless and thought of Jacklyn.

"Bea, how about if we stop at the market after the car wash? You can pick out all the food and treats you like!" Dad's hands looked loose on the steering wheel. I nodded. "And I can grab a box of fertilizer."

I'd heard music and seen Jacklyn in the mirror. I'd looked in the mirror and hadn't seen myself. Her breasts looked soft. I thought her hips curved in a pretty way. Like the piano in her living room. I also thought (and I was sort of excited about it) that I might have seen a flank.

"Oh Christ!" The machine before the carwash tunnel beeped at my father. He tried to enter the wash code from his gasoline receipt, but he missed buttons. It made funny music; he glared at it.

I looked over my shoulder. A line of cars had formed. Families wanted to get home because it was Saturday night. "It's making me start over now. Oh Jesus."

With the window down, I could smell the soapy rinse that washed the Jeep ahead of us. Though I liked the car wash, the smell was something that had been in a bottle too long, like a lotion I'd gotten three Christmases ago. I'd saved it until the smell spoiled.

We started to pull into the wash. Dad realized too late that he'd left the antenna up. He said something religious again. Then he turned on the engine to put down the antenna, even though the lighted sign in the wash tunnel told us our pre-soak had started already.

I couldn't tell Rachel about seeing her mother's body. I felt embarrassed for going over to my friend's house when she wasn't there.

"Ahh. Now this is more like it! Wouldn't you say, Beatrice?"

My father and I had gone to carwashes almost every weekend when I was younger. He'd taught me to fix my gaze on the sheets of water pouring over the car. He told me that it helped him to relax. I liked the sounds, the blue brushes with the long rag hair that reminded me of Muppet monsters. I liked that it got dark.

"I have some exciting news, Bea!" He patted his lap twice which appeared to mean that he was really trying to convince me of his excitement.

“What?” I wanted to concentrate on the water and the windshield. It looked to me like a glassy eye.

“Well! Grandma and Grandpa Nelson have invited us on a cruise to see Mommy.”

“Mommy?” The stringy monsters looked like long eyelashes, violent and dripping. If I’d ever heard my father call my mother Mommy, I would have remembered, because the stupid sound of it made me want to hurl my dumb body into the blue brushes.

“Anne. Bea. A cruise. We’re taking a cruise, Bea. To see Anne, Mommy. Hmm.”

At that point I would have liked to see what kind of face Dad was making. Except I couldn’t bring myself to turn toward him.

“To the Bahamas, Bea! For the fourth of July!” Now he clapped the steering wheel which honked the horn.

The whole thing was rinsing itself. The windshield eye was rinsing itself like the emergency eyewash in the eighth grade science lab. Rinsing itself or crying. Dad explained that Grandma and Grandpa also wanted to celebrate Grandma’s birthday with us: we would celebrate, discuss the cruise, and eat chicken breasts with a mango-teriyaki reduction. “Us” had to mostly mean me. We’d done stuff with my mother’s parents without my mother before, but last time my father, out of nervous energy, had taken a handful of the fruit-flavored calcium antacid tablets Rachel had left over at our house.

He started the engine. The sign lit green--drive under the dryer slowly. The week my mother had left, Dad had driven so slowly that the drying vacuum sucked a windshield wiper off our car.

“Well, Bea, well? I know I’m excited!” He liked the surface to get really, really dry so it didn’t spot.

“It will be nice to see Grandpa.” I eyed the backseat for the towels we would use to finish drying the windows. I unbuckled and grabbed them. “And Grandma too.” I tried to remember when her birthday was. “When are they coming for dinner?”

“That’s the best part!” Dad flipped his towel over and began to dry with the other side. “They’re coming tomorrow.”

“What!” In the window I looked cartoonish and awkward, my jaw gaping.

“Tomorrow, Sunday. It turned out to be the evening everyone’s schedule favored. I’m baking your Grandmother a birthday cake. A grande dame of cakes.”

I handed Dad another towel. Tomorrow. I would not think about the cruise until I could talk to my grandma about it. I had this idea that would make it so I didn’t have to go to high school in the fall--but I couldn’t tell anyone, not even Grandma. I glanced over at my father whose cheeks had flushed. He dried the top while I worked on the windows, and it began to look as though it might rain.

The next morning, after I waited for Rachel to call, I decided that I would start The Bell Jar. The title sounded musical, and I felt a fizziness in the back of my lungs that told me things would not be the same after I read it, like when I was seven and I tried to climb on my mother's lap; too big for her narrow-set hips, I slipped to the floor.

The Bell Jar sat to the left of me, ready. Nevertheless, I thumbed through The Catcher in the Rye--lots of swearwords. And Watership Down (I read from the blurb on the back), "Ushered in adulthood with its portrayal of mutilation and death within a community." I had chosen the book about the bunnies over Lord of the Flies on librarian Nancy's recommendation, but I was beginning to have second thoughts. How long it was! Five hundred pages! Besides, I, unlike my father, liked bunnies. I found it secretly funny when they ate his lettuce and rhubarb--I didn't want to read about bunnies dying. I'd rather read about boys if the subject was suffering.

Time for The Bell Jar. The cover had a nice metallic finish to it, not something I often saw in library books. And a picture of a dried rose on the cover, interlaced between the holes in the "B" of "Bell Jar." How pretty. I put down the book and walked over to the window. I shoved the gauzy white curtain out of the way, sneezed from the dust, and looked for Rachel coming down the street on her bike.

Rachel didn't ride her bike anymore. Last winter we were riding our bikes to school when Rachel hit a wet spot. A white SUV had been riding on our tails and Rachel, fearing a collision, swerved toward a clogged storm drain.

Three of the popular eighth grade boys saw it all. They laughed at Rachel's ruined leather jacket, a Christmas present from Jacklyn, caught in the spokes of the front wheel. Rachel didn't cry. But when I helped her to her feet, her rigid posture betrayed a captive fury that silenced the boys. She walked over and shoved one of them, Bobby Miller, into some thorny bushes. "Asshole, Mother Fuckers."

After that, according to Rachel, riding bikes was for "babies." I still liked to ride my purple glitter Miss Buzz bicycle with the banana seat, only I couldn't let Rachel catch me doing it. And I still looked for my friend pedaling down the street, coming to see if I wanted to ride to the creek to catch crayfish. We hadn't had a crayfish in our empty aquarium in over a year. Didn't Rachel miss that? We'd once found one whose claw had been torn off. We kept it until the new claw grew. We even caught bugs for the crayfish, despite the fact that bugs made us want to wiggle out of our skin. I closed the curtain again. I needed something to drink for my dry throat. I heard my father bustle about the kitchen making cake batter. I figured the counter would be dusted with flour, that there would be eggshells in the sink. He had offered me the opportunity to help, but I didn't like being told I cracked eggs wrong: "Like this, Beatrice," he would say, tapping the egg on the side of a glass bowl and, with one hand, splitting the egg by what looked like intention alone. "Oh my." Always an "oh my" at my

attempt. “Bea, it’s easy, first thing students learn in cooking school.” Nor did I mix correctly. “You can’t use that speed! You’ll whip the hell out of it! Christ, Bea, don’t switch gears like that—you wouldn’t switch gears on your bicycle like that.”

I wanted to stay as far away from the kitchen as possible. But my thirst. I tiptoed down the stairs. It was quiet. What had happened to the cooking sounds? The purring of the Kitchen Aid, the gentle clunk of a ramekin against the counter. I heard voices:

“Like this?”

“Oh! No, oh. Oh my.”

Jacklyn. I flushed with fresh panic. I would need at least a week before I could face Jacklyn again. The site of her torso, twisting in the door frame. The breasts, the thighs, the curve of her belly, rolling hills of her backside. I sat down on the steps, clutched my knees to my chest and trembled. Still, besides my hot flush of shame, I couldn’t help but think I would really like to look like that when I grew up. That would be just right.

Did Jacklyn come to tell on me? Was that why Jacklyn interrupted my father’s baking? I crouched for a moment, trying to see into the kitchen, pointless. I stood up just in time to see Jacklyn stick a finger into the batter. Now the cake would have finger in it! Finger in Grandma’s cake. Jacklyn wasn’t dressed for baking at all—she wore a burgundy sweater that buttoned up to a weird flappy neckline. Jacklyn was trying to cover up—in case I tried to get another glimpse. It was too hot for a flappy sweater, especially in the kitchen with the oven heating and the burners glowing orange—I gripped the bannister, craning my neck for a better view.

“Arnold, it needs more vanilla.”

“Well, I don’t—oh my.”

My

father was no match for Jacklyn. I couldn’t be sure, but it seemed the entire vial of vanilla had splashed into the cake batter. Dad scooped out spoonfuls and dumped them into the sink. Then he took the whole mixing bowl and let the liquid trickle out.

Orange juice. I tried to sustain myself with water, ducking back upstairs to my bathroom. But I found a dead fly floating in my gargling cup. Cupping my hands under the faucet sort of worked, except more water ended up on the front of my shirt than in my mouth.

I crept back to the stairs and decided to listen--maybe Jacklyn was on her way out. Maybe my father had grown balls enough to kick her out! The cake was probably ruined, and certainly Jacklyn had told on me, unfairly, it was just an accident. It was some kind of lesson about not going into other people’s houses uninvited. Jacklyn poured the batter into an angel’s food cake mold. It looked like a dollop had crept over the edge. Now she was fingering the mold’s rim and licking the batter off her finger. My grandmother’s birthday cake! I couldn’t watch anymore. I’d rather die of thirst in my bedroom than enter a room with Jacklyn or my nerdy father. Where was Rachel anyhow?

“Bea?! Is that you on the stairs? Honey, come here a minute. Honey?”

My nerdy father. “I’m busy, Dad.”

“But, Bea, you must...come here...it’s important.” His voice wobbled like a kid’s first ride without training wheels. “Please, Beatrice?”

I closed my eyes and held on to the railing. I took one slow step at a time. “Yes, Dad.” I needed more hours at the library—I needed to live at the library. I needed to find a way to become somebody’s indentured servant.

“Hi, Bea.”

Up close it wasn’t just a flappy sweater she wore—it was a booby sweater—that was what Rachel and I called it when a shirt was too tight in the chest. Jacklyn squeezed me on the shoulder; her finger tips were cool but I felt myself flushing. “What are you up to?” she said. “Nothing.” I tried to hide in a way that wasn’t obvious. I pretended to have an itch on my forehead--that way I could “scratch” with my hand covering my face.

“Oh, but you said you were busy, Bea. My little busy Bea!”

Through my fingers I saw my father wink. I loathed the “busy Bea” thing. “I was reading for school.”

“I wish Rachel would read more. She’s off at that Lilly or Libby--”

“-Lilly?” Just saying it made my lip twitch, wanting to curl.

“Right, she’s off at that Lilly girl’s beach house at...oh., I don’t remember. Some beach house on some beach. Wouldn’t it be nice?”

My eyes burned and glazed with angry tears. Nice? Nice like a drowned kid in a pool.

“I’ve thought about retiring on the coast. How cozy it would be to read Joyce, sip on Kenyan coffee, freshly pressed, listen to the waves come in,” my father said.

“Uh-huh.” My voice gurgled. I opened the refrigerator, stuck my head inside and pretended to be looking for...cottage cheese. We didn’t have any cottage cheese so I could look for a long while.

“Well, Bea. I have something to say.” My father sounded fake. He emphasized “something” and it rang like a late-night infomercial in my ear. My cold ear, cold from refrigerating.

“I thought that since Jacklyn would be by herself tonight, we could have her over for dinner and cake.”

“What?” I spun around, the refrigerator door hitting my back. “What? For Grandma’s birthday? She doesn’t know Grandma! And Grandpa has social anxiety”

“Arnold, I don’t have to come—the last thing I want is to burden you--”

“--Nonsense! Gerald does not have social anxiety disorder. He just says that when he doesn’t want to go someplace, usually shopping, with Bea’s mother or grandmother.”

I opened my mouth, only I couldn't form words.

"And since Jacklyn helped us out by babysitting you so much while I finished my book." I was fourteen, Rachel too---we were the babysitters, not the babysat. "It seemed fitting to invite her."

"That's so sweet of you both," Jacklyn said.

"Open the oven door, Bea."

The heat stung my eyes. I refused to look at either of them. I had come to the kitchen for orange juice. I would get my orange juice: I marched over to the cabinet, found a glass, opened the fridge, took out the orange juice, opened the lid, poured the glass full, sipped off the top, returned the lid, shoved the container into the fridge, and slammed the door. "Okay. Let me know when Grandma and Grandpa are here. I have to get back to reading."

"Bea, I told Jacklyn that you and I always made frosting together. I told her that she couldn't help me with the frosting because you and I have a tradition and it turns out just right."

That was when I looked back at my father and instantly wished I hadn't. He had a hunk of batter in his beard and sad eyes. "I can't help you. I have to read my book, Dad."

But I didn't read. I got out my green spiral notebook that was supposed to be for driver's ed. I ripped out two pages, found my ruler and made a calendar by running a pen along the straight edge in a grid format. Basically, I needed to learn everything from the ninth grade by August. Science, math, history, English, art and probably something they called "health" which had everything to do with keeping the football coach employed.

I had a plan. I could choose my own future just like my mother had.

Chapter 5

Now that my mother was gone, my father loved to grocery shop. Outside of his garden, the organic market was his favorite place to pass the afternoon. Produce from the organic market reminded him of produce from his garden. The market had more eggplants and cucumbers and tomatoes than my father would grow in his lifetime, but this didn't seem to make him jealous or resentful, the way it would some fathers.

We received the organic market newsletter in the mail. The letters on top were all made to look like different fruits and vegetables: oranges for "o"s, carrots and celery stalks for the more angular letters, an eggplant for "b." My father clipped coupons from this newsletter, and he took pleasure in comparing prices, ounces, and nutritional contents. His behavior never bothered me; after spending a year grocery shopping with Dad his habits became routine to me. Yet a couple of months ago a girl in my home room class, Megan with the big dog teeth, saw my dad and me at the market. She was with her mother, and a little kid with a choo-choo train on his shirt. She waved at me, yelled "Hi Bea," her incisors flashing. Then the little kid shoved her to get to the cereals. He had the same teeth. What a frightening family, I had thought; the mother too, with these funny pointy teeth she could probably tear meat with. Later at school, Megan stopped me at the water fountain. "Bea," she whispered, "is your dad a homo?" Water dribbled down my chin for a second before I wiped it with my sleeve.

I stepped away from the fountain and pulled her towards the lockers. "Gosh Megan," I started with a whisper, "I think you'll have to ask him yourself." I sneered, "Because I don't take an active interest in my father's sexuality."

The house was quiet when the car pulled into the driveway. My father had yelled upstairs about needing to pick up something for the dinner, and I had assumed he'd gone to the market. I looked out the window in my room and saw Grandma and Grandpa's Black Lincoln Town Car. They called it The Hearse. But they were both healthy as horses, Grandpa said. Grandma always wore pastel sweatsuits; from above she looked like a pink amoeba drifting up the walk to the door. Grandpa offered his arm to her when they climbed up the steps; she took it without looking. It seemed strange that my father hadn't returned in time for their arrival.

I hurried into the bathroom to give my hair a quick brush. It turned out to be knottier than I'd hoped. My mother had always been a stickler about brushed hair, probably because hers tended to look messy. Her blond hair puffed with humidity into a halo around her head. I wondered what the salty air did for it, if it relaxed and fell against her shoulders like Jacklyn's did always. Grandma and Grandpa knocked again as I managed to wet down the rooster tail that sprung from my scalp anytime I neglected

to put my hair back in a ponytail. I sighed into the mirror, trying to feel charming in my imperfection, and ran down to meet them.

“Happy Birthday, Grandma!” I wrapped my arms around her. It felt good to hug Grandma since she was soft in her sweatsuit and a little bit squooshy as her body enveloped mine. Grandma rubbed my back a little before she let go. “Morris,” she said. “Did I leave my purse in the hearse? Ooh, that rhymed!”

“What? How would I know? Just let me give my granddaughter a squeeze.” My grandpa wore a burgundy v-neck sweater and a pair of pants that always had a stain on them, no matter how often my Grandma put them in the wash. Hugging him, I felt the architecture of his bones the way my grandma’s flesh didn’t betray. Suddenly it occurred to me that these were the two most perfect people in the whole world.

“Morris, would you go get my purse—remember, we have something in there for Bea.” My grandma ran her hands over my hair. “Look how pretty you are. Now Bea,” she waited until Grandpa was outside. “I left my purse in the car on purpose. I wanted to distract your grandfather so I could ask you about womanly things. Are you having any problems with womanly things?”

There was still the pressing question of the flank. Yet Jacklyn’s body had sort of answered that question—better than I would know how to frame it for my grandma. My face remained blank, free of womanly problems.

“Are you having any difficulty with your cycle? Do you need me to take you to the drugstore to get more feminine hygiene supplies? Anything, Dearheart?”

Grandma’s eyes watered a bit. I might have thought she was crying, except that she wasn’t blowing her nose the way a person had to when in tears. Grandma’s eyes watered with concern, I suspected. “Don’t worry, Grandma, I have two packages under my bathroom sink. I’ll be okay for a while. Thanks, though.”

“Any time you need me, Bea. Your grandfather and I are just a telephone call away. Does your father have our number prominently displayed by the telephone?”

My mother had me memorize important numbers when I was six in case I became stranded somewhere. But she was the one in the middle of the ocean, stranding herself on purpose. “Three-six-zero, nineteen-twenty-one. I have it memorized.” I liked my Grandma too much to tell her about my problems. I didn’t want her to know of my transgressions: crumbling friendships, naked people. I just wanted my grandmother to love me.

Grandpa returned with Grandma’s purse in his hand and a Florida State ball cap on his head. Grandpa thought that wearing the cap annoyed my father since Dad worked for U of F. Dad would comment on the hat, and Grandpa would make some comment about State having a better record in some sport my father didn’t care about. This banter had become a ritual.

“Morris, do you have to wear that hat? It’s not polite—this isn’t your home--”

“Let’s go sit.” I led them to the living room, just beyond the kitchen.

“Bea, is that a cake that I smell?” Grandma grabbed my shoulder and raised her eyebrows, “it smells like a yellow cake!”

“I think that’s going to be a surprise.” The cake was my father’s business; I didn’t want to get involved. He’d become sensitive about unveiling his creations. Several months ago when a colleague of his came to dinner, he had scolded me for showing his collection of flower lithographs without him. He quickly got over it when he remembered that he’d been the one who’d asked me to give the Mitchells a tour of our home in the first place. He blamed his forgetfulness on the difficulty he was having with his Emma Bovary book, but all that happened the weekend of my mother’s fortieth birthday, when she hadn’t been home to celebrate.

“I love surprises—as long as they don’t kill me,” Grandma said.

“I wouldn’t mind cutting the cake now,” Grandpa disagreed. “Your father has the crazy idea in his head that guests shouldn’t come over for dinner until seven o’ clock. I’m starving by seven o’ clock.”

I decided that I should offer my grandparents a drink—drinks seemed to calm adults down. “Please sit.” I motioned toward the couch. “Can I bring you something to drink, Grandpa?” I would make a plate of cheese and crackers too; I’d begun to enjoy my father’s absence—having Grandma and Grandpa to myself.

“Can you make me a dry martini, Bea?”

“With an olive or a twist?” My father had taught me to make a dry martini and then some.

“What!” Grandpa shouted, “you shouldn’t bartend at the tender age of fourteen, young lady. That father of yours has his priorities all goofy.”

“Morris, please. Bea, would you bring me a glass of red wine? I seem to remember that your father keeps a bottle of that lovely Australian wine—a Shiraz--on hand.”

I nodded at Grandma and fumed at my grandfather. I had forgotten he could be like this. How easy it was to fall into one of his traps. The last time I’d seen him, Grandma told me that he was getting crabby on account of his Bursitis, that he sometimes took out his frustrations on the wrong people, that we just had to tolerate him and remember that he was a teddy bear at heart, but I couldn’t remember those things. I decided that I wasn’t going to bring him the plate of cheese and crackers after all.

They settled down on the couch. Even as I walked into the kitchen, I could sense the way they were taking note of every detail of the house. They looked for things of my mother’s that my father might have taken down, they looked for walls he might have painted strange colors without consulting the woman who was more their daughter than his wife.

Just as I struggled with the wine opener, I heard my father at the door. I jogged over to him, wanting to warn him about his father-in-law's foul mood. As he opened the door I stopped; Jacklyn stood at his side. She had come back. Any desire I'd had to protect my father, any allegiance I'd felt toward him dropped away. I let go of the bottle of wine while keeping my fist wrapped around the opener. "Grandpa and Grandma are here. I can't open this." Jutting my arm forward, the momentum of the gesture loosened the cork; the bottle shattered at our feet.

"Jesus, Bea! What the hell are you doing?" my father yelled. My grandparents chorused a "What happened!"

"Nothing, Grandma!" I stared my father down. "Sorry." Wine flowed. It flowed under my bare feet like a river of blood. Jacklyn's ankles were splattered and likely speckled with pieces of glass. Although I couldn't be sure if I'd let the wine fall on purpose, I felt a crooked joy welling up in my chest, and I smiled the smile I had seen on Rachel's face when she'd cut Shannon's hair at the party.

"Sorry doesn't do much good! It's seeping into my rug, damnit!" My father left Jacklyn and me looking at the floor as he sped into the kitchen for rags. She and I just stood there, still standing when he returned. I don't think either of us had moved, and I still held that wine opener, the cork pointing down at my father who crouched into the mess, frantically sopping. I wasn't afraid that Jacklyn had told on me anymore, because I didn't care what she told my father about me. I trusted neither of them at that point. The wine would stain his palms a guilty red, just as it would stain the soles of my feet.

Grandma and Grandpa, who'd been advancing toward the hallway at a grandparent's pace, appeared. "That didn't sound like nothing, Beatrice," Grandpa said.

"Oh heavens! Bea!" Grandma put her hands to her cheeks which seemed her physical response to things about fifty percent of the time.

"I'm fine, Grandma." She stayed several feet from the mess, but my grandfather crept closer, inches away from where my father worked with his rags. My father stopped and looked up at him. "Alright, Morris, Arlene, forgive me for this mess. Why don't you two sit back down and I'll take care of it." My father sighed. "Please, Bea, will get you some crudities, crackers, a wheel of brie to work on, but sit down." A film of sweat broke on my father's brow, his patience shattered. "Please, sit." He added, "You're the guests," probably because he didn't want to sound too much like a dog owner giving commands.

My grandparents were neither slow nor unable to process more than one shock at a time, therefore, as they reluctantly shuffled away, I examined them for reactions to Jacklyn, the lovely woman standing above their daughter's husband as he cleaned. When they'd made it back to the living room, I looked at Jacklyn: "Have you ever met my grandparents?" She shook her head, wrung her mouth into what looked to me like an embarrassed convulsion.

“Get them the plate of vegetables,” my father snapped, but I refused to look back at him. With each step into the kitchen I made footprints. I opened the refrigerator and easily found the plate of sliced red and yellow peppers, carrots, and sugar snap peas. As I brought a peapod to my lips, I heard the murmuring of Jacklyn speaking to my father. Perhaps she wanted to leave; that would be the sensible reaction to an assault by red wine.

Yet an hour later we were all still there, together, at the table. Jacklyn had several opportunities to go politely, especially when my grandpa first met her and called her my father’s “dinner date.” My father never introduced her. No matter! Jacklyn introduced herself, smiling, saying she was happy to meet my grandparents. Rachel had met them and said they were such lovely people, Jacklyn lied. Rachel never said anybody was a lovely person; she preferred to call people assholes or freaks.

I had made sure that Jacklyn would not get my mother’s chair at the table. In doing so I had to sit there, between my father at the head of the table, and Jacklyn who now sat in my former seat. My grandma and grandpa sat across from Jacklyn and me, and I saw them watching our plates more than once. They followed our forks and analyzed the arrangement of our food: whether we let our asparagus touch our chicken, how many spoonfuls of sauce we used.

“Arnold has been helping me with my yard.” Jacklyn set down her fork. This was the first time she’d spoken without being spoken to. “Without him, the whole thing would be dead by August, I’m sure.”

“Helping, I don’t know, Jacklyn.” My father was speaking and simultaneously trying to swallow, a ridiculous habit. “Eckhm, excuse me. Honestly, I’ve never seen such an aggressive network of rhizomes. The lawn may just die after all!” He chuckled as my grandparents stared at him with his mango grilled chicken on their forks.

“Well, Dad, you’ll just have to work harder to save it.” He’d have to spend more time with Jacklyn, I guessed.

“Yes, Arnold. I want a healthy lawn out of this!”

Out of what? I stabbed at my asparagus spear. “Maybe you should find a professional, Jacklyn. Dad, don’t you have a friend who grows flowers professionally?”

“Ralph, mmm, yes. Yes, well, I’m getting to the point where I may consult him. Of course. Good idea, Bea.” Dad took a swig of his wine. He insisted they drink white wine with the chicken. “Now why don’t we talk about something more interesting than my horticultural aspirations, no?”

“The cruise and our Annie,” Grandma piped in.

That was a good idea. “Yes! Tell us all about the cruise, Grandma!”

“Well, M’dear, your grandfather and I will drive over to your house early Wednesday morning on the week of the July fourth holiday. We’ll pick up you and your father and drive down to Cape

Canaveral where the ships are docked. I can't remember the exact time we set sail, but Anne said she would meet us as we board the ship."

"Is Mom going to be really busy with her work?"

"I hope the hell not." Grandpa blew his nose into a napkin. "Those tickets are non-refundable. Annie had better spend some time with her family."

"Isn't there some sort of discount for staff's family?" Jacklyn asked.

"Fifteen percent. And that's why they make it non-refundable. Not a very good deal if you ask me--"

"--We didn't ask you, Morris," Grandma rolled her eyes. "It's a fine deal because we'll all be able to celebrate seeing Anne."

That was the end of the cruise conversation, and my father brought up my driver's ed course at the high school. It started on Tuesday. Yes, I was excited, I said. Yes, it was a great opportunity. No, they didn't have that sort of accelerated program when any of them were young. How lucky I was.

Dad and I snuck into the kitchen to get the cake. He let me arrange the candles; I put six on one side and five on the other because we didn't have sixty-five candles, and they certainly wouldn't have all fit on the cake. When we sang Happy Birthday, Jacklyn's voice came through the strongest. But she didn't eat any of the cake. Neither did my father. Grandpa had two pieces and Grandma and I each had one. When my grandfather mentioned having a third, Grandma swatted his hand, and my father insisted that they take the rest of the cake home with them. Grandma didn't want the cake, though, so I wrapped up a piece for Grandpa and hid the rest behind a case of Diet Coke. Rachel loved cake.

At the door we stood on the bare floor where my father's oriental rug had been. Grandma gathered me in her arms (her breath smelled like frosting), and told me that I would be the best little driver around. She couldn't wait to hear all about it in July.

I had read the first two pages of The Bell Jar almost a dozen times, each time telling myself that I didn't care if Rachel ever called me again. This made for crappy comprehension. I hadn't seen Rachel since Lilly's party four days ago. Tomorrow we had our first driver's ed class. I figured that this driver's ed business was the hair of the dog: Lilly would be there, people from Lilly's party would be there. Driver's ed would make me cool or it would kill me. If I didn't pretend to embrace the loathsome prospect of high school, I would lose Rachel, that much was clear--driver's ed was my last chance to show Rachel how grown up I could be, how mobile.

Driver's ed happened at Gainesville High. I feared it would happen like an accident. It seemed, these days, that everything I thought was tainted with driving metaphors. I couldn't think imagining about traffic accidents. Lights shone in my eyes like headlights and stop lights. The can

opener sounded like a car motor, and my father's gardening wheelbarrow rolled with the whoosh of tires over concrete.

By Tuesday morning I was so nervous I couldn't think. I called Rachel. I told her I had something she'd want: half a cake. She appeared outside my house. I made us cheese sandwiches on seven grain bread, but Rachel didn't want hers. In addition to the cake, she'd found my father's unopened pint of Godiva Hazelnut Swirl. The chocolate painted a thin brown band around Rachel's mouth, almost as though she'd tried to put on lip liner but didn't know what she was doing. She had a smear of white frosting across her cheek too. I worked up the courage to ask her about her weekend.

"Jacklyn said you spent the weekend with Lilly."

"Yeah. Lilly and I ate so much chocolate I think I'm addicted." Rachel shoveled another mouthful, her lips dark and glistening. "We ate chocolate and rode on the jet ski with Lilly's brother and his friend. It was pretty fuckin' fun."

I could think of no reply. No, that wasn't true, I could tell her that I'd seen her mother naked, or that I'd heard our parents whispering to each other. But I wouldn't let either of those things out of my mouth. My cheese sandwich was now an angry fist in my stomach. I tore the last paper towel off the roll. "Rachel, you need to wipe your mouth."

Rachel talked about Lilly's brother as we walked to class. She talked between bites of a chocolate bar she'd fished out of her school bag. Lilly had probably given it to her because it was Hershey's—bad chocolate. My father said he'd rather eat a bar of candle wax than Hershey's chocolate. Rachel's breath reeked so heavily of chocolate, I was almost relieved to enter the school building.

The high school smelled the way nursing homes smelled. It wasn't the same smell as the nursing home our junior high girls' choir had visited last spring (Rachel said that the smell was the smell of ghosts), but the difference wasn't much more than the fact that the nursing home smelled a little more like cooked carrots. Growing up and dying apparently gave off a stench. This worried me, and deep down I suspected that everything human beings did reeked of death.

Rachel went to the bathroom even though she'd just gone at my house (probably a bad sign?). She told me to wait in the hallway for her, and I did, a choice I now very much regretted. My sandwich stomped around in my stomach. I couldn't think of anything to do as I stood there. In a high school, if you stood alone, you had to be doing something. I knew this innately, but it was reinforced in most of the t.v. shows aimed at the young adult audience. I felt idle, a devil's playground. I thought of the bottle of wine I'd smashed. I tightened my laces. I pulled my socks up. I made sure my tiny silver earrings were in. I did these things again and then, when I could stand it no longer, I went into the bathroom which smelled like public transportation: a mixture of vomit and pee.

The half dozen stall doors appeared closed, and nobody stood by the sink except me. Just me. I looked in the mirror which had a brown stain inside the glass along the bottom half. It made a person look gross. "Rachel?"

I waited for her to answer, fully expecting her to answer. "You okay in there, Rachel?" Again, I didn't know what to do. I pulled up my socks, yanked them really. Yanked at them hard because I regretted coming to the high school. Driving was bad for the environment.

Class would start soon. I knew that much. Why didn't she answer? Had something gone wrong? Was she slumped over the toilet? And because I had seen people do it on television, I bent over and looked for Rachel's sandaled feet on the linolium. I guess I should have worried, but I could only worry about myself then, because nobody was in either of the stalls, and I would have to find the classroom alone. That thing about ghosts seemed true, that a smell announced their presence. Rachel had disappeared; I wondered if she was a ghost. Tears pushed against my eyelids. Fucking high school.

Then I saw a partial wall which lead to a door on the other side of the bathroom. A maze it was. I seized the idea that Rachel had been confused, had gone out the different door and not been able to find me. That idea, the hope that she'd been lost without me, slowed my racing heart.

I went out the second bathroom door into another, smaller, hallway. A lady stopped me there, calling me dear.

"Are you looking for something, Dear? Can I help?" Her breasts pushed against her blouse. The buttons held on for dear life. It was a clothing abomination that reminded me of my image in the mirror when Rachel had made me put on the shredded shirt.

"Driver's education." Or was I looking for Rachel? Fear made me an honest kid. An honest, if not confused, kid.

"Dear, don't worry, just follow me!" I thought she might have winked. But it could have just as easily been a twitch. And I wasn't there to judge. We walked back, exactly the way I had come, and turned the other way at the hallway with the bathroom. A fork in the road, that bathroom.

The lady lowered her voice to a whisper. She didn't speak at all when we got to the classroom. I was grateful; she had probably been around kids long enough to know how to and how not to embarrass them. I smiled the smile that melted my face into a picture of innocence and thanks. That was the face Rachel made at the gas station when she wanted to buy cigarettes. But that face didn't work for things like cigarettes. For cigarettes you needed to lick your lips and not smile at all.

The door had a panel of glass in it. I looked through and saw kids. Nearly everybody probably. How could I be so late? How did Rachel get past me? I pushed the door open. Everybody looked at me. Of course they would look at me, and I didn't know why it was so upsetting, as upsetting

as it was, but I felt tears again. So I shook my head a little. It probably looked like a spasm, still, I needed my hair to fall in front of my face to cover up the damage.

"Hi, sorry." I didn't look at the teacher. I was looking for Rachel. When I saw her sitting with a clump of kids we knew, the ones she knew better than I did, Lilly among them, I looked for an open seat. But I didn't want the front. "Nobody ever sits in the Goddamned front!" my father would say. And I didn't want to be nobody so I found a seat in the Goddamned back. By a kid who smelled like a pot-luck casserole.

Things got better from there. We watched a video where a guy was thrown out of his car. The police picked up a piece of his skull and put it in a bag. The kid next to me said, "Rad." I kept waiting for the teacher to announce that it was time to pick driving partners. I watched the teacher's mouth, looking for those words: "Pick driving partners." Apparently, the teacher was an assistant football coach. He had an orange mustache and resembled some French actor my father liked. Although I was growing tired of looking at his face, I could not risk Lilly becoming Rachel's partner. Rachel and I had to be partners because we lived nearly next-door. My butt hovered over my seat, my hands gripped the sides of the desk. I thanked the film strip for giving me all sorts of nervous energy, and at the end of class when Coach Grubb said the magic words, I sprang up and grabbed Rachel's arm before Lilly could even turn her head.

Rachel jumped when I pounced on her. And again, most of the kids were staring at me, especially Lilly. But that was too bad for her; Lilly would just have to be partners with another kid who lived on her cul-de-sac. They could drive in circles. Endlessly. And never get their licences as far as I was concerned.

"Bea! Yikes where'd you go?" Rachel asked once class was dismissed. "I was looking at you all during that film strip, but you wouldn't look back." Rachel was digging change out of her pocket. She would want to stop at the vending machines by the cafeteria.

"I couldn't take my eyes off the film. That could be anybody."

"This could be your grandfather, your brother, or father. This could be you!" Rachel had a thing for voice imitations. She managed the British narrator with ease. We couldn't figure out why it was a British narrator since the filmstrip came from Washington D.C. Still, we laughed. We were partners, everything was okay, and I didn't want to know how she'd left the bathroom and gone to class without me. As we passed the drug store I just wanted to laugh with Rachel. We laughed well together, from our stomachs to the tops of our heads. Sometimes Rachel would start to hiccup after we laughed like that. If she got the hiccups she'd drink a Diet Coke to wash them away.

Chapter 6

Now that just three weeks remained before we set sail, my father began taking his old clothes out of the closet. I caught him trying on tailored shorts and polo shirts that he wore in pictures from my early childhood. This was pure coincidence, I had awoken before my alarm with a fierce urge to pee, and run into him in the upstairs hallway, in front of the only full length mirror in the house.

"I bet Grandma could let some of those out for you, Dad," I said. Before he could respond I shut myself into the bathroom. I didn't know if Grandma could let those clothes out—it just sounded like a good thing to say—sort of smart ass, but not unforgivable.

"Very funny, Beatrice!"

I returned from the bathroom. Dad stood in front of the mirror wearing a lavender polo shirt and pleated khaki shorts. Something lumpy going on around the waist indicated the shorts could not be buttoned. "Don't wear that to class, Dad, please."

He turned in the mirror. "You know, Smartie-pants, these aren't really that small. Nothing a few trips to the fitness center couldn't fix."

I managed an "Mmm hmm," in a hopeful pitch. Maybe this was a good sign, my father trying to look his best when we visited my mother on the cruise ship. Maybe if my mother saw him in his old clothes, the clothes he wore when she supposedly still loved him, things would turn out okay. I could empathize with my father through that logic; I could support him even if he looked wholly idiotic in a lavender polo shirt that showcased his forty-four year old tummy and made a mockery of his European mountain man beard.

"Speaking of, I think I'll change and go to the gym now."

"Now?" Light hadn't yet begun to creep through my window blinds.

"While the day is young. You're welcome to come along."

I had loved the fitness center as a kid. Even though no one under twelve was allowed to use the equipment, Dad used to bring me to the center while he worked out. The exercise bikes kept me happy for hours. Students manned the desk and made rounds to check for trouble, but they didn't want to make a scene with anyone. I was quiet enough, but I liked to ride the bicycles in unorthodox ways. I would put my right foot through the left pedal and stand. When I'd worked up some momentum, I went up and down endlessly as I watched the TVs suspended from the ceiling.

Sometimes college boys were there. They lifted hundreds and hundreds of pounds. They wore belts around their backs so they wouldn't hurt themselves, and still, their faces twisted into terrible expressions. I imagined those were the faces human beings made when they tried to run away from a

tiger or muscle out of the grip of a bear. Lifting weights had to be ancestral, instinctual. Still, some of those guys blew their bodies way out of proportion. Dad said that as a kid I had asked a lifter why he had the wrong head for his body.

My father filled each of us a water bottle. They were blue plastic, said "Typhoon Lagoon," and I could vaguely remember drinking a Slurpee out of one of them on a family vacation to Disney World before Grand-mère had come to live with us. Dad grabbed us each a granola bar; he insisted we have some sugar in our blood before exerting ourselves.

Walking into the fitness center, I wished I had a better outfit on. Instead of my red gym shirt and black shorts, I wanted to be wearing a green sweatsuit, with stripes running down the legs, like the girl I saw on the first treadmill. This puzzled me because it wasn't something I knew I lacked until that very minute. I was torn between feeling deprived and not caring. I wondered what my mother would have worn if she'd ever accompanied us to the gym. Surely there was a fitness center on the ship—did she use that? My father had dressed himself in a t-shirt from the MOMA and navy blue mesh shorts that accentuated the dark hair on his skinny legs. It made me feel better to know I looked better than he did; although as soon as that thought crossed my mind, I cut through the rows of treadmills to put as much distance between us as possible. I told him I didn't feel like running.

My timing had been impeccable; just as I walked away from him, he put a white sweatband around his head. I imagined that it was a medical dressing—it concealed the slice they'd made to take the top of his head off. He didn't know it but they would have to take his brain out at some point. Poor Dad, I thought. My sympathy didn't last as I recalled the image of my father and Jacklyn standing by our front door. That had been real and my pity for him just imagined.

Exercise was supposed to relieve stress and clear the mind, except as I climbed onto a machine and put each of my feet on the foot parts, my hands on what I supposed were the handles, I felt suddenly self-conscious—worse than if I'd been on a treadmill next to my father. I looked up and noticed that I could see myself in the distance. Mirrors lined the walls, and I was small, a tiny parasite on the machine that was lined up with all the other machines in a militaristic formation. How to work this? Besides swooshing my feet back and forth, I wanted the electric part to keep track of my progress. I pushed some buttons; the exercise equipment asked me how many pounds I weighed. I didn't know! What kind of question was that? I couldn't remember the last time I'd been to the doctor, but I vaguely recalled the pediatrician's nurse telling me I had broken the hundred pound mark. She'd said it in such a deadpan that I hadn't known what to think. Was that a problem? Was it a congratulations? Either way they gave me the same two shortbread cookies with the finger holes in their middles that they'd been giving me since I started going there. I intended to enter 105 pounds, but 255 showed up on the screen. I wanted to fix it, but then I thought the machine might be spring-loaded or hooked to some kind

of mechanism that counter-balanced my weight according to the number I put in. I gleefully hoped it would bounce me into the air.

It did no such thing. But I was burning through calories by the second. Exercise was easier than people gave it credit for. This machine was certainly a walk in the park compared to the crap we did in gym class. It was good to know that there was more to exercise than running back and forth between colored lines on a black top—yet another example of the way public school ruined a perfectly good thing. According to my plan, I was done with school now. So I could do things like this—what was I doing? Moving my feet in a suspended forward locomotion—instead of gym class. I decided that my mother used the fitness center on the ship. We would use it together and she would show me how to enter my weight in correctly.

The lady (I didn't know what she was: girl, woman, adult?) on the machine next to me seemed to be exerting herself. She made huffing noises that reminded me of Luci when the vet said he had a doggie cold. She sweated profusely. Drips rolled down her arms and dropped on the floor; in fact, a puddle had formed under her. I casually consulted the digital screen on her machine. Eighty-minutes. She'd been doing that for eighty minutes! I'd been doing it for three. Did she get bored? Earphones sprouted out of her ears, only I couldn't see what they connected to. Did the machines play music? Could a person plug headphones into the exercise machine the way you could into the armrests of airplane seats?

This lady had burned five-hundred and fifty-six calories so far. Rachel told me the other day that a king sized snickers bar had five hundred calories. I wondered if this lady planned on eating a king sized Snicker bar. It seemed more likely that she had a body image problem. I guessed her goal was one-thousand calories. Her breath came in spasms that reminded me of the dishwasher before Dad called the repairman. My breathing was nothing noteworthy. I could have carried on a perfectly-articulate conversation at that point if any one cared to step up to my exercise machine and engage me. Mr. Barton (Jacklyn had asked us if we called him Fartin' Barton once when Rachel and I were bitching about the rope climb he asked us to do, the rope magically hanging from the gymnasium ceiling, a puppet-master's string.) wouldn't have considered my movement exercise unless I began to feel as though I would vomit. The girl with dog teeth told him she wanted to barf after the timed mile run and he simply slapped her on the back and bellowed: "Walk it off, McMann." The spot on the blacktop where she puked was crusty for days. Hadn't I found myself on memory lane!? I wondered what it would be like to not go to school. Wonderful, certainly, but there would be no puked-on blacktops or sweaty nooses in my life. The calories on my screen turned to sixty. I couldn't think of anything for sixty calories. An apple? A banana. Too bad I hadn't checked the granola bar box for its calorie info. Sixty five now. An apple and a jelly bean.

Weeble. My machine said weeble, weeble, weeble. More eeble than weeble, actually, but I didn't know what an eeble was so I let my mind supply the "whah" sound. Weebles wobbled but they didn't fall down—not true! Rachel had a weeble that fell down. She had chewed on it and it flopped right over in a wretched weeble face-plant. I admired that weeble. The others looked like bobbing idiots. Back and forth back and forth—what kind of idea did that give a child? I thought of how sometimes when Rachel spent the night, I would wake up from the bed moving. I never said anything as she clutched her knees and rocked. I wondered if Rachel still had her weebles—not that I wanted to play with them. I certainly didn't, but I yearned for the sick and empty feeling I would get from watching them wobble. Dizzy. Would Rachel be okay without me?

A patina of sweat had broken over me. I watched the woman next to me out of the corner of my eye until it began to ache. I matched her rhythm perfectly; our machines revolving in a mechanical syncopation that made me forget to breathe. We whispered to each other in hushed voices, the voices of hiding children or the secret language of twins. Did she know as well as I did how connected we were?

The exertion was making me sick, mentally ill. My thoughts came in pangs of brief and inexplicable pain. This lady didn't know me from Eve or Esther. Or Sylvia. Each girl in the whole world fused for just a second in my mind, our vulnerability and forward motion caught in the revolving gears of my elliptical trainer. I had burned one hundred calories.

I climbed down and looked for my father. He jogged on a treadmill. He called it running, and had been particular about it when I was younger: "I don't jog, Bea, I run. That's no small distinction. It means my heart has developed the muscled efficiency of great athletes." Maybe all that muscle had gone to his heart because he had the twiggy legs that rendered him a mutant bird in my eyes.

As I approached, a rotund bald guy sauntered up beside my dad's treadmill and slapped him on the back. The guy had a fuzzy familiarity to him. I thought picnic. Maybe I'd met him on one of those departmental picnics my father detested. Then I thought baked beans. I guessed he was the guy my dad had made fun of for spilling baked beans down the front of his shirt. I'd seen it: one baked bean poised on the strange slope of this man's abdomen, as though making a great pilgrimage to a better life. I turned around; a conversation with bird father and bald bean man did not appeal. What would be better? In the corner, people rolled on giant balls. They splayed themselves over the inflated spheres and probably got quite a head rush in return. I found an unoccupied green ball and sat down. My butt sank further than I expected, a perverted carnival ride to my virgin cheeks.

For all the excitement exercise provided for the body, it surprised me how active my brain became too. The image of Jacklyn sitting at the kitchen table next to me knocked at my skull uninvited, and that empty bathroom at the highschool crouched like a tiger ready to spring. I saw Jacklyn naked; I thought of Rachel's boobs and narrow shoulders in the "sleeves" shirt she'd cut for me. Would I look any different to my mother? I almost wished she wouldn't be able to recognize me, that I'd have to tell

her who I was, tell her that the mature lady before her was her daughter Beatrice. But I wanted to look scrawny and pathetic too so she'd see how much she needed me. Because I couldn't figure out which I wanted more, I flung my torso back into nothing. Once the ball settled under me, I relished the blood crowding my brain. Esther biting the metal bits in the psychiatric hospital. The waves of light. Blood, bright blood. I bobbed there, an Ophelia floating, until my father tapped my knee.

We didn't go home. When we got in the car my father mentioned that instead of going straight home we would stop at Ralph's to enjoy his garden. So the hefty bald guy was Ralph, the flower genius. My seatbelt felt like it was tying me down—I hated it when adults changed plans. I became the captive. Nobody cared whether Bea wanted to see some bald guy's flowers. That was one thing I wouldn't have to deal with if I learned to drive.

Ralph had a huge house on the other side of the university. My father had said that Ralph's wife, recently deceased, had money, and they'd finished renovating that big house just a few months before she got sick. Ralph's kids were older than I was, one son living in Boston and the other in New York. When I left Gainesville my father would be alone. He might have the company of Jacklyn—whatever insidiousness that was—but I could only imagine him alone. His gardening might improve. He would be fine.

"Ralph's going to tend my garden while we're gone, Bea." My father liked to talk to me while he drove.

"Oh." I affected boredom like a pro.

"It will truly be wonderful—the bougainvillea will flourish, it will." He stopped suddenly, touched his chin. "Did I tell you about the fair, Beatrice?"

"No."

"I'm entering my hanging vines in a contest at the fair."

I didn't really care, but I asked, "the Jacksonville fair?"

"You know, Bea, ideally I would enter as many fairs as possible—get a better idea of what's out there. I've asked Ralph to show us his orchid grower's trophies." He looked away from the road at me. "I'll bet he's filled rooms with them."

"I bet."

My dumb dad needed to concentrate on my mother's heart, not hanging baskets. I picked at my t-shirt until I got a bit of it to unravel. We parked in the street, and when my father got out of the car he looked excited enough to skip.

Ralph let us in. I saw that he'd taken his shoes off. His socks made puffy pockets around his feet, and he appeared to be plodding along on fallen arches.

My father clasped his hands together. "Let's see the booty!"

"The trophies are boring, Arnold. I will, however, show you some of the hot-house orchids."

"Of course. But Ralph, wouldn't your gilded chamber encourage me to greatness?"

Ralph didn't reply, and I liked him for that. I looked at the paintings on the walls—not a single flower. It was one of those contemporary houses with hard angles and bright colors: magenta, chartreuse, turquoise—it didn't fit Ralph at all, and I thought about his dead wife picking out swatches of fabric, carpet and paints.

Completely sterile except for the warm light, the room swelled around us. Some flowers looked like blue and violet spiders on stems, others like speckled white stars growing out of clay pots.

"My god, Ralph."

"He's my prize," Ralph pointed to a plant with red flowers that seemed to bow before the light.

"Would you look at her!" My father used the voice I assumed most men saved for centerfolds or sports cars.

"Bea, do you want to touch one of the petals?"

I didn't. His face wobbled and I quickly said, "My hands are dirty from the gym."

He didn't press me, and when my father quickly volunteered to paw the plant, I knew I was off the hook. I wandered around looking at the glass—the windows took on all geometric shapes, some were large as entire walls. I found two glass sculptures in opposite corners of the living room: electric colored slabs balanced in their own mysterious gravity, waves of color on color. I would have liked to touch the glass, but the thought of seeing my own finger prints shamed me.

This man loved pretty things. Or maybe his wife had wanted them. We didn't live like that. No one in our family had ever furnished a house with an eye for design. It wasn't that we were too poor. My mother didn't care. And my father was, in all likelihood, color-blind. In seventh grade I tested to see whether he knew the difference between green and red. He didn't.

After the trip to Ralph's, it became clear that my father was not the accomplished gardener he aspired to be. Ralph had done wonders with orchids since his wife had died; my father would certainly recognize the potential parallel in his own life. He went to work in his garden as soon as we got home. My father told me that he enjoyed gardening more when he broke a sweat, that he liked the feeling of manual labor. The electricity in his muscles pulsed; his heart churned blood with the force of Niagra Falls. I wondered if he'd been reading poetry again. When he talked like that it usually meant he'd had a late night tryst with Emily Dickinson or worse, Walt Whitman (my father called him "The Sensual Poet"). It made me feel gross when my father talked that way. The sight of his wet cotton shirt clinging to his chest made my scalp itch.

As I walked up the stairs to the bathroom, I feared electrolyte imbalance. The climb made me as unsteady as if I'd been trying to walk along the floor of that weird pirate ride, the ship on a pendulum, at the amusement park. I'd exerted and now I needed to refuel. Oh well, I thought, thrilled by my own

insolence. I was choosing to ignore my better judgement and proceed down the path that wasn't best for me. I ran the shower extra hot, my usual fear of cooking the delicate organs (spleen, gallbladder) stuffed away.

For a person who didn't like to get wet, I relished this shower. Beginning at my hips, I ran my hands over my body, wondering what might ache tomorrow. The exercise had sloughed away my tired surface; I felt fierce; I imagined myself behind the wheel of a car.

Once out of the shower, I eagerly called Rachel.

When she picked up I said, "This is the March of Mimes." I was trying to be funny, giving myself the wobbly, withered voice of an old woman, only I panicked and didn't know what to say. "Do you have any mimes you'd like to donate? Remember, all mimes are tax-deductible." I was scraping the bottom of the barrel.

"Our last mime was murdered—locked in an invisible box." Rachel knew how to play along. "A preventable tragedy, the local paper said. He only thought he was trapped inside."

Then came the awkward transition between pretend and real. I laughed at her wit and out of relief that she'd humored me.

"Hey, Bea. Whatcha doin'?"

Dripping dry. I'd only blotted myself with the towel—too rushed to call Rachel and make plans for the day. "Nothing. You want to come over before our driving lesson?" This small invitation rang out from my throat.

"Sure. Right now I'm helping my mom dye her hair, so later."

"What color?"

"Hold on. Cappuccino, says the box." Jacklyn yelled something to Rachel in the background.

"Okay. Come over when you can," I said. As I hung up I tried to imagine Cappuccino colored hair. Milk, coffee and foam. Hair? If it made Jacklyn look funny, then all the better.

I felt like calling people. With my father tucked away in his garden, I could have all sorts of illicit conversations. I could dial wrong numbers and pretend to be from The March of Mimes. I flipped on the television in my father's bedroom, searching for a shopping channel. My mother and I used to watch it for laughs. Before reality television, the shopping networks were as close as it came to people making idiots out of themselves for little or no money. My mother, a lover of slap stick comedy and general goofiness, adored an amateur performance of any kind. The people who called into the shopping channel seemed trashy. Mom and I would sit together on her bed making fun of the callers, and because my mother, an adult, allowed this, it didn't seem mean or wrong at the time.

I found the QVC shopping channel. Two blonde ladies sat on a bed and ran their hands along white pillows. It took me a minute, but I realized that the comforter was for sale, complete with sheets and pillowcases. They caressed that comforter like nobody's business. On a cold night, the comforter would keep anybody warm, the blonder of the two blondes told me. Comfort Quarters brand meant value. It meant value, but the women touched the milky whiteness of the blankets the same way I'd touched my body in the shower.

The blonder blonde announced that it was time for the testimonials.

"Hello, Caller? Caller? Are you there?"

My father made the bed every morning, even the morning after Grand-mère died. I turned the bedspread down and crawled into my mother's side of the bed. We were lucky enough to have air-conditioning that circulated even in the upper level of the house, and my damp body drove me happily under the covers. I listened as the shaking voice of an elderly woman spoke.

"...I bought a set of these for my Daughter in Wichita. Then for myself. My husband's dead. Comfort Quarters keeps me warm."

I wondered whether that was something that would help or hinder sales. Nobody liked to hear about dead people. It occurred to me that something more must be wrong with the woman if she was cold. Everywhere it was summer, hot and damp.

I flipped off the tv. Presumably that woman kept the air conditioning on too high. My father did the same, and I complained about it endlessly when I didn't have a heavy blanket to climb under. But if that woman lived alone she could decide for herself what temperature to make the house. Perhaps it wasn't real, the testimonial. What did I care about it anyway? The world looked different without my mother sitting next to me. The callers weren't funny anymore. How could I have ever thought they were? I climbed out of bed and wondered whether I'd lost my mother, my sense of humor, or both. Which was worse to lose?

Back in my room I put on a pair of cutoffs and a green t-shirt. I wanted to be as comfortable as possible when I drove this afternoon. Rachel had been driving since she was eleven years old. At eleven, Rachel was five and a half feet, so she sat behind the wheel as high as an adult, and when Jacklyn gave her the Jacky O. glasses, Nobody would have thought that it was just a little girl driving that Honda. Sometimes Jacklyn would ride in the car but not feel like driving, mostly, though, Jacklyn sent Rachel off on her own to get a package of hot dogs or a case of Diet Coke. I, on the other hand, had no practice at all driving. My father tried to get me to drive him places the past few months, but I held firm, resolving only to learn in the presence of a professional: Coach Grubb, the driver's ed teacher.

One might think that a person with no driving background would be more excited about getting a license than someone like Rachel, who'd been driving practically all her life. But Rachel wanted to

make an honest woman of herself—not that she had a problem breaking the law when it came to buying cigarettes or stealing. If she had her own license she wouldn't have to wait for her mother to send her out on an errand.

Chapter 7

It was a pattern that began when Grand-mère came to live with us, but it wasn't until my mother left that I began to see it. Whenever my mother made a mistake, she was caught. One might wish to chalk that up to the exceptionally vigilant law enforcement of a university town, but that wasn't so. Because every time my father made a mistake, my mother had to reap what he'd sown. In retrospect, it was almost biblical, the injustice of it. Dr. Arnold Bouvier could hold up a liquor store and then share a swig of Southern Comfort with the Security Guard on the way out. If my father forgot to attach the registration renewal stickers my mother had paid for and handed to him, she would be the one who, driving home from the market, would get the chiding from the cops.

One day, my mother was driving us, Grand-mère and me, back into Gainesville when she made a mistake. It turned out to be a multi-layered mistake, like the wedding cake for a doomed marriage. Because she no longer trusted Grand-mère inside the 7-11, my mother left Grand-mère and me in the car. I was free to unbuckle my seatbelt; Grand-mère, however, had forgotten how. She just sat, and most of the time it wouldn't even occur to her to move, let alone realize that she couldn't.

Mom had asked me if I wanted a pack of gum. I used to chew cinnamon gum whenever I could, even in school where I had learned to press it between my cheek and my gums so as not to be caught. In reality, my hiding spot made me a dead ringer for Brando's Godfather, but teachers had better things to do than to discipline Bea Bouvier. I was getting clever in lots of ways, and since Grand-mère could no longer form a coherent sentence, I realized she could no longer berate me for my sloppy French. I sat in the car with her and sang nonsensical nursery rhymes; I could understand them no more than Grand-mère could. It was a mystical pleasure to sing, to speak, without knowing what I said. To have learned a language without effort or comprehension. I saw the soft and bright rhythms as I heard them in my ear: syllables strung together like glass beads. I loved the way the sounds felt coming out of my mouth. As a child I had put my mother's green glass necklace in my mouth, and the French was just as smooth and cold.

I sang, and Grand-mère didn't even grimace. It disappointed me. I wondered if she knew she was waiting for my mother to appear with her donut. Years ago she'd complained about the brownies and cookies my mother made for Christmas and Easter; Grand-mère launched into lectures about patisseries where she'd eaten brioches that kept her full for days yet felt light as feathers in her stomach. Everything was better than perfect, and whenever she'd seen my mother with a knife and the tube of pre-made cookie dough, Grand-mère told my mother Americans had made a disaster out of gastronomical living and that it made her lose her appetite. Grand-mère was Canadian.

And yet once disease had digested the goodly part of her brain, Grand-mère wanted nothing more than a plain cake donut from 7-11. I stopped singing my song when my mother emerged from the convenience store with the white wax bag in one hand and a twenty-ounce bottle of Coke under her armpit. My gum would be in her purse, as usual. Singing had made me naive, or maybe numb to my mother's condition. Any idiot would have known that Anne Bouvier was losing her mind, but it took me much too long to understand. Grand-mère was the weirdo, the one Mom and I secretly hated on our worst days, but beyond the hating, I thought we were fine.

"Mom, why does Grand-mère like those donuts so much?"

"Christ, Bea, I don't know."

"Maybe she ate them when she was a child. And she was happy then." I felt smart in my conjecture. I'd heard of "comfort food."

"Sure." My mother started the car. Two girls on skateboards whizzed by, I remembered, because they had long boards, were older than me, and looked like people Rachel and I would have liked to hang out with.

So Grand-mère sat in the front seat, the death seat, with a cake donut in her lap. She cradled it in her hands with her hands settled on her lap. The way she cradled it, it could have been a small animal. I squinted to see if I could make it a brown mouse or muddy duckling in my mind, but the most precious thing I could imagine was a doughy halo.

Grand-mère gave me the white wax paper bag her donut came in, and we were driving home. Then my mother did something I considered thoughtless. For months she'd changed her mother-in-law's diapers, bathed her in my bathtub (always mine), and dressed her again when she found her sitting naked on the floor. My mother had shown courage, stamina, and kindness—and then she got careless. It was the kind of tragic allegory in which a fearless warrior storms a temple to find jewels and talismans. Mostly brave and good, his integrity and intelligence lead him to the treasure chamber. He has succeeded! Only there, in the chamber, he takes something he should not, and the angry gods topple the structure around him. My mother took Grand-mère's donut, ripped a piece off with her teeth and returned the wounded baked good to the old woman's lap.

Grand-mère began to yell: "No" and what sounded like "train." I hadn't ever been this close to her during one of her fits; her voice pulsed and shattered in my ears. She screamed in bursts, screeching, stopping, screeching and stopping again. It sounded oddly like my father's old alarm clock, the one my mother finally convinced him to throw out.

Occasionally, I enjoyed a dramatic situation, especially if I could blame it on Grand-mère. But then I just wanted everything to stop. We were a few feet from an intersection and there was no hope of pulling the car over. We slid through the green light as Grand-mère strained against her seat belt. It

seemed her heart would burst when she carried on like that. I didn't recognize my indifference to her suffering, but I felt my mother's frustration .

"Do you have anything back there to give her?" My mother's voice was steady. She counted on me to make the situation right. She was slowing down, looking for a place to stop. We both knew that Grand-mère's would need changing if we ever made it home. Her outbursts always necessitated replacing her adult diaper.

"Grand-mère, ça va, ça va. Prend-ce lui ci." I gave her my sweater so she could worry the edges, busy her hands. So she would forget the donut she'd been cradling. As soon as the car stopped moving, Grand-mère's voice dried up. I had un-buckled myself to lay the sweater over her hands, and it had quieted her, reminding me of the way birds sleep with blankets thrown over their cages. If Grand-mère's world was no longer in her mind, perhaps it was in her hands—though she had lost coordination too. She didn't know anymore what she'd lost.

We seemed in the clear. My mother started the car again. I began to follow the bird's dropping on the windshield, trying to keep it between the side of the road and the dotted yellow center; it was a way to focus so closely on our movement that I had absolutely no idea of where we were going—losing the forest for the trees, one tree, one needle on one tree.

Paying such close attention, I didn't notice when my mother turned at a tight angle. A wild ride only increased the difficulty of my game. Grand-mère herself didn't care. When an actual emergency arrived, Grand-mère became a trouper, oblivious and uninterested. Nobody said anything: not a gasp, cry, or scream. Neither my mother nor Grand-mère showed any sign that we'd gone where we weren't supposed to be. Then the bird poo I'd been so carefully guiding through the world found itself on the hood of an oncoming car. There was no space, no road ahead of us, just an Audi.

Later, my mother told me I screamed, that I scared her more than the prospect of a crash. The driver of the Audi, my father's boss, swerved; we passed cleanly. My mother had held the wheel steady, and I wouldn't ever know how tight and pale her knuckles looked against the steering wheel. When I told Rachel the story I spiced up: Grand-mère was counting backwards from one hundred in French and laughing into my mother's ear; we swerved by three cars instead of one, and one of them was a yellow Hummer (Rachel had gone through a stage of coveting a yellow Hummer). My mother was just stressed, tired, I thought. The night before we'd stayed up late watching a movie. Rachel asked me if I'd been in a fight with my mother. She said she didn't understand why she tried to do it with me in the car. It took me four days to understand what she'd meant. I don't think my mother wanted to kill us any more than she wanted that bite of Grand-mère's donut. I believe that when it comes to human motivation, one cannot tease the accident from the opportunity.

My mother got her license revoked. Perfectly choreographed, a cop had appeared and approached our car. She hadn't had her driver's license in her purse or the car insurance in the glove

box. She hadn't been wearing her seatbelt. And my father got so damn mad he refused to drive my mother anywhere for days. In protest she walked five miles to the mall to buy herself expensive department store face creams; she could have taken a bus, but it seemed she wanted to draw out her journey, perhaps give herself time to plan a more permanent escape.

When Rachel and I went on our first driving lesson, I was a fourteen year old girl who wanted nothing more than for the world to match up with the world I'd been promised as a child: a mother, father, friends. My world was not as it was supposed to be, and I tried to compensate for that by squinting. I had an astigmatism, undiagnosed at the time, that prevented me from seeing the world as it was. My eyeball bent the plane of a sign, a face, a page in a book, such that I squinted madly and filled in the information so obsessively that I didn't know I was doing it. But that no more justified my accident than Coach Grubb's behavior justified the way I treated him. Driver's ed instructor and football coach, Mr. Willy Grubb smelled funny. The driver's ed car smelled like bad cheese, but I still don't know whether he was socially awkward in his dealings with teenagers, or if he had designs to interfere with my best friend. They told us: safety first, better to be safe than sorry, if in doubt, throw it out--all those phrases trotting through my brain made me suspicious. And my suspicion conspired to make me want nothing more than to get even with someone in my world. I chose Coach Grubb--Bea, harbinger of retribution; it wasn't pretty--whether he really deserved it or not.

The sunlight came into our driver's ed car at a strange angle; I found that I couldn't see anything to the left of the steering wheel. It seemed that Couch Grubb kept provoking Rachel with small talk. We'd just seen a film strip in which a cartoon horse (and my father wondered why people were losing faith in the Florida public school system) lectured us on the importance of limiting driving distractions. The boy horse (I supposed we were supposed to assume he was a boy horse because I couldn't fathom they'd endorse horse lesbianism in an educational film) was driving while a girl horse, a bow between her ears, sat in the passenger seat stroking his mane with her hoof. It sickened me, but I wondered if it gave other kids ideas. Eventually, the car crashed into a cartoon barn.

Coach Grubb wasn't stroking Rachel's mane, but it felt like he wanted to. His voice dribbled out in a quiet squeaks, an occasional whisper; either he took me for deaf (one kid in the class was) or invisible.

"What, Coach?" Sitting in back, I stuck my head between the front seats. "I didn't catch that. Are you giving driving advice, because I want to learn." I spoke loudly; that could have meant I was hearing impaired.

"Rachel is an advanced driver. This information doesn't help people at your level, Bea."

He wanted to mess with me. He did. He underestimated me; he would regret that. “I got a perfect score on my last quiz, Coach.”

He chuckled the sort of chuckle that meant business. “Those quizzes are a formality.”

“Good.” Rachel turned her head. “Then I won’t worry about studying.”

We all laughed together. Coach found that funny. I had been warned; this man warned me—he wasn’t supposed to laugh at something like that. He wasn’t playing with a full deck. I decided his deck was trick. I sat back. I looked out the window to see a car pass us. Inside the other car, a man with the Confederate flag on his hat looked at Rachel, just as Coach did, his golden arms draped around the black steering wheel.

I would feign boredom. And make Coach Grubb forget about me: Bea, the silent threat. Part of me got mad that this man brought out such an angry child in me. Because what started as my instinct to protect Rachel had morphed into hatred, and I only wanted to show him how weak he was.

Rain had spotted the side windows, so I selected an especially large spot and played my traveling game. I made the spot skate along the street, just next to the curb, then let it hop up to the sidewalk where trees, trash cans, and street signs forced me to jump down to street level and back up again. Rachel’s driving shortened my game. I’d soon developed a nauseous headache. The dashboard clock showed we were late.

“Coach, my father expects our lessons to end at five.”

“I thought you said Rachel’s father was picking you up.”

Rachel said nothing, though she and I both knew we would walk. “No,” I said. I wanted to tell him to fuck off. We weren’t stupid girls. We were both smart, tested well, and I was as suspicious and in tune with criminal inclinations as my mother. “Why do you care,” I snapped. He wanted one of us to confirm that she didn’t have a father; it was textbook.

“Mr. Grubb, shouldn’t I turn left at the light so we can get back?”

Coach hesitated a second longer than I would have liked, although the part of me searching for drama exalted.

“Yes, left up ahead, Rachel. Take Walnut all the way back to the school parking lot.” He cleared his throat, satisfied. When we arrived, I grabbed Rachel’s arm and began walking towards home. “My father’s picking us up on the other side, Rachel,” I said loud enough for Coach to hear. We’d put fifty yards between us and the training car when Rachel realized she’d left her driver’s ed binder in the front seat. How could she! I imagined Coach stealing the binder, his sausage hands fingering the pages. I ran back to the car.

“Coach!” He turned to me. He was logging something in his teaching book. “I forgot my binder, Coach.” I liked repeating his name, the vagueness of the title, the absolute meaninglessness it carried.

“Oh,” he scowled. “This it?” Of course it was. He’d had it under his notebook. “You should be more careful, hon, this isn’t like English class where you can lose your term paper and still live your life safely.”

How absurd. Did he know my father taught literature? I doubted it; nevertheless, I took the binder and ran back to Rachel. She stood against the sky, her eyes searching somewhere within it. And my father called me a space cadet. I had no idea what she thought about.

When we got far enough away, I launched into my loathing of Coach. “He’s a sick fuck, Rach. I can’t believe he pried for info on your father.”

“What?” My cursing jolted her. Usually, I let her use the “F” word.

“When he said he thought your father would pick us up.”

“So?”

“He’s trying to get information. He’s digging for something. Just like the meter reader.”

“That’s nothing like the meter reader.”

“It is, Rachel.” Sarah Parker had been raped in her own basement. People said she was doing laundry for her older sister in exchange for her sister’s ballet flats. I didn’t believe that part, but last year in the gym locker room, a bunch of girls, myself included, saw the cross she’d burned into the flesh under her breasts. Another rumor went around saying it was her protection. Still, Rachel and I wondered if the meter reader had done it.

“Bea, why is Mr. Grubb like the meter reader?”

I heard exasperation in her voice. “He gets too close to you, Rachel. I can smell his thoughts.” I couldn’t really, but this sounded more compelling than any hard facts I could offer.

“Smell his thoughts? You’re off your rocker, Sister. Maybe Mr. Grubb is a little weird, but don’t waste your time on it.”

My rhetoric hadn’t taken. I’d just told her I could smell a potential pedophile’s thoughts, and she’d accused me of over-analysis. Me, when she was so idiotic she couldn’t see the revolting charade of a friendship between her mother and my father (it didn’t occur to me at the time that she might have seen everything and not cared). I clasped my notebook even harder against my chest, flexing my biceps until it burned. We spoke two different languages, Rachel and I. Useless, and if I’d spoken Mandarin, Rachel would have thought it a tiny section of fruit swimming in its own juice.

I stopped walking and looked around, half-hoping to see Coach following us, proof of my theory. “Rachel, I don’t trust him.”

“Fine with me. I don’t like him either. He’s a self-satisfied asshole with gross clogged pores on his nose—did you see those?”

I nodded. Rachel was coming around.

“But I don’t think he’s criminal.”

We walked. No car followed us for more than a block. I wanted to be home, and I wanted to be at sea. I wanted my mother or a mother who might tell me the world wasn't something to fear. In a hundred or so yards that feeling passed. How could it linger in any human being without driving her to death? I stopped paying attention to my surroundings and instead concentrated on the duality of human violence. My father had been using the word "duality" a lot at the dinner table lately. He had mentioned Foucault and Sartre. He felt that it wasn't a good enough way of looking at things. But I was examining the world for the first time, and for me dualities made sense. Binary opposition, self versus other. That I could see clear as day. That I could smell.

"I like Lilly's brother," Rachel said as we passed the gas station. "I think he likes me too." She paused, "only I'm not happy about it. I mean, I'm not giddy and spacey and fantasizing about making-out all the time. I don't get it."

As we neared the duck pond we began cutting through backyards. I looked in the windows as we passed. People never guard their back windows as they should. Through a back window I'd once seen a woman pour the entire contents of a blender pitcher onto her husband's chest. "Maybe you like him as a friend."

"I don't know. I don't think that's it."

"What makes you think he likes--"

"--Who the fuck am I?" Rachael stopped walking completely. She grabbed my wrist with her cold hand. I didn't like that Rachel was the one questioning existence.

"You are Rachael: smart, funny, kind and pretty." Not exceptionally kind but I wanted to round-out her portrait.

"You are Beatrice," she said, though I wasn't sure if it was meant to mock me.

"I am Bea."

"I am Rachel. My mother is Jacklyn."

The weather had changed, as though the humidity had been sucked from the sky. "My mother is Anne." Even when Rachel let go of my wrist I could feel the cold echo of sensation. We didn't want to talk any longer. I thought to saying something about the absence of ducks in the pond, but it was better to keep silent.

During the rest of that walk, I imagined coming home to my mother. She would sit on the porch with her arms clasped around her knees. She wouldn't realize it, but she would be there just to wait for me. And as soon as she saw me, she'd stand up, wave, and smile with an open mouth. She'd see me walk faster, hurrying to get to her. I'd know she wanted to ask me if I'd rather rent a movie or play cards with her. Closer, I'd see she wore orange, a warm orange that glowed in the faltering sunset.

Sometimes I loved my mother too much. It was dangerous for me to love someone who had left because the love had nothing to do but grow, expand to fill the physical gulf between us. I did--I

loved her too much. But how wrong it would be to place a limit on that kind of love—there were so many limits—I lived for that love. I expected too much of her. Expected her to understand that I lived for her and after her, quietly observing how the world would treat me in her absence.

I spent most of the next day in my room. Late that afternoon, I began to hear my father scurrying about downstairs. He was excited about something, because if he'd just been doing housework, his steps would be heavier. I hated that I listened to what he was doing. Trying to read had become more and more futile in the last week. Driver's Education, my father, Lilly: I could blame so many things for ruining my attention span. I imagined my mother cooking: she had a talent. And she'd been a loan officer at a bank. I didn't like to cook, and I didn't want to be trusted with anyone's money.

Dad was climbing the stairs. As I heard him, I locked my eyes with the page of words again. He didn't have to know of my struggle. I wondered if he knew the way the words slid across the page for me, if he would want to get me a tutor. Maybe he didn't care. That was the thing about Dad, I couldn't tell anymore if he cared, and I could not flourish living with such uncertainty.

"Knock, knock!" His hand was on the doorknob before he'd uttered the second "knock." I was lucky I could hear him coming. That way, if circumstances ever necessitated it, I could move my wooden dresser in front of my door. I would put my desk behind the dresser and my desk chair behind the desk. Having the plan comforted me, still, I knew in the back of my mind that I wouldn't have time to move everything, that he, just as my mother had found a way out, would find a way in.

I hid the math book under my bedspread.

"I'm so glad you're home!" My father beamed.

"I'm always home." I said. Where had he thought I'd gone?

"Remember when I told you about the ladybugs?"

"No." I watched as he sat down on the edge of my bed. He held a box, and peeking out of the top was a sort of cheesecloth sack.

"Oh," his smile faded. "Are you still reading that?"

He had nodded at the Plath book. "No Dad, I'm holding it up in front of my face in order to build upper body strength." I was crabbier than I'd first thought.

"Good one! Anyhow, my ladybugs arrived this afternoon. The UPS woman dropped them off, the one with the tatoos on her legs. She thought I had ordered leeches--the University ordered leeches a few weeks ago, and apparently leeches and ladybugs have similar shipping instructions."

"Your ladybugs?" I didn't like the idea.

"We had a long discussion about it at Ralph's, as we admired his orchids."

I didn't recall.

“Lady bugs are beneficial insects, Bea. The adult lady beetle and the larvae will feed on pests that are not too hard shelled, too fast moving, or too large.”

“Are you reading that off the package?”

“Does it matter?”

I frowned. I closed my eyes and hit myself in the forehead with the Plath book.

“Good god, Bea! What are you doing that for?”

“So you have a box full of bugs.”

He’d set the box on his lap, and he began to lift the cheesecloth sack out until he cradled it between his hands. It moved. Slightly first, then in larger contractions.

“I have a sack full of bugs. I want you to help me free them in the garden.”

“You have one on your shirt.” I saw it, crawling up his chest, then still, poised as a baked bean. It took him a minute to look down.

“How did that get there?”

His rhetorical questions irritated me. He looked goofy and vacant in the eyes. “I don’t know, Dad.”

“Hello.” The bug crawled onto his finger. “Look at you! You shine like a ruby!” He turned to me, still smiling. “Don’t they shine like rubies, Bea?”

“No, Dad. They don’t.”

“Come on, Bea, humor your father! I don’t ask for much. I know you’re busy, Bea. My Busy Bea. Please, this bug is a modern miracle of nature! You would not have thought such a thing were possible.”

I covered my face with the book, but it seemed only to encourage him.

“It’s dusk, Bea! The sky is darkening. Remember when we used to gaze at constellations—Orion’s Belt, The Great Bear—it will be just like that.”

“That’s crap, Dad.” What would be like that?

“Okay, you’re not that easy. Sometimes I forget. Because I say it doesn’t make it true anymore.”

“Sorry.” Although I meant it, I didn’t want to consider the idea further.

He sighed, and I thought he’d resigned himself of the hope that he and I were going to have a deeper moment together. But I could not read him anymore; he babbled on in a burbling mania, overflowing into the space around him as a bathtub with too many bubbles. He had three more boxes of bugs downstairs! They waited on the kitchen counter. “They’re waiting for us Bea! They are refugees, waiting!” He was fruity, or nutty—a nut cake in his excitement. He would burst or continue to hound me--I didn’t know which was worse--until I went along with him.

I followed him downstairs. He reached into the refrigerator. He kept the lady bugs next to the

left-over turkey breast. He hummed. Everyone hummed during the summer. It seemed to me that people hummed when they were up to something. I pulled up a chair at the table, sat, put my chin in my hands; it was a flagrant display of elbows on the table. My stomach hurt. My eyes hurt, and I closed them. I was waiting for whatever he decided we were supposed to do next. I opened them again when I heard my father walk to our front door.

“A wonderful surprise,” he said.

A woman’s voice rolled into the kitchen, stirred the air. And then I knew I would have no peace the rest of the night.

“They’re in the kitchen!” My father led Jacklyn to the boxes of bugs.

“My god! I’ve never heard of this!” She wore a silky, sleeveless shirt and a scarf. A flowing scarf, I had never seen anyone wear a scarf in the summer. Seasons did not matter to Jacklyn.

“You can help us release them.”

Jacklyn saw me and smiled. She winked. She smiled, winked, waved, and scrunched her nose up in one big gesture, precious and quick.

“Hi.” I’d grown fond of my voice in the monotone. I listened to my father give the same speech about beneficial insects, except, this time he added a bit about laying eggs in small yellow clusters and alligator-shaped pupae. Even ladybugs were gators in Gainesville.

The phone rang when I could no longer stomach Jacklyn’s reciprocal excitement for the pupae. “Grandma?”

“Bea, dear, yes, good to hear your voice, dear. May I speak with your father?” Grandma had a duty to speak softly and sweetly, but she also had a duty to speak with her granddaughter before asking to speak with her son-in-law.

“Grandma, I can’t wait to see you!”

“How sweet. I need to speak to your father.” Grandma was turning on me. The edge in her voice had caught me off-guard.

“Dad.” I set the phone down and returned to the table. Crying in front of Jacklyn was not an option.

“How was driver’s ed for you, Bea?” My grandma was supposed to have asked that question, not Jacklyn.

“Fine. My head hurts. I’m going to rest it if you don’t mind.” I plunked my forehead onto the table without checking her expression. It would be impossible to discern my father’s conversation if I had to make nice with Jacklyn.

“Poor thing.” Did she hate me as I hated her? I probably wanted her to like me as much as I disliked her. The refrigerator hummed under my father’s conversation. He hardly said a thing, and then, just before he hung-up, “I’m so sorry about this.”

“Sorry about what!?” I didn’t care that he was on the phone; I should have been told what was going-on. Instead, my father turned around and waved his hand at me, shoo-ing my voice away. Clearly, I had no other choice. I looked over at Jacklyn. In my sweetest voice, I told her I needed to rest my head upstairs. When she asked if she could do anything to help me, a “no thank you” escaped my mouth, dripping with gratitude. I even waved goodbye as I got up from the table.

Because Jacklyn’s back was to the kitchen counter and my father was busy listening and scribbling something on a pad, no one noticed when I took a box of lady bugs from the refrigerator. So I was not alone as I climbed the stairs. I brought my face down to the box and kissed it. As I sat down on my parent’s bed, I told the lady bugs that they had a new place to live. If my father wanted to bring strange ladies into our house, I, the dutiful daughter, would help him.

Turning down the covers, I thought I could smell the ginger lotion my mother had worn. Even if the sheets had been washed a dozen times, the sweetness welled up in me. My mother would have loved what I was doing; she would have helped me release them. I smiled as I opened the box. My fingers shook as I untied the living bag. I let a stream of them go onto the bed, and they moved like liquid in lines. But the more I released, the more erratic it became. They flew, landing on my arms, in my hair. Because I couldn’t scream, I started to cry. I’d let thousands of them escape, and they spun and danced in all directions. I shook a ladybug out of my shirt, brushed them off of my skin, then dashed into my room like a child.

Why had I gotten so scared? Because you might have hurt them, I told myself. I had wanted the lady bugs to turn on my father. I imagined the king in the nursery rhyme my father used to sing to me. I pictured the king’s one and twenty blackbirds piercing the crust of his pie with razor-sharp beaks. I imagined a ladybug pie. My mother could make my father a live ladybug pie. I wanted them to fly out of that pie and attack Dr. Arnold Bouvier. But I didn’t want to hurt the ladybugs. And that’s what I had done. They would die in my parent’s bed.

That night my father swore he would never speak to me again. Before that, he said that Grandma and Grandpa weren’t going on the cruise with us. I started crying and called Grandma myself. My mother’s brother in Cleveland was having surgery on his heart, and my grandmother wanted to be there for her son. I returned to my bedroom and wrapped myself in my bedsheets as tightly as my need for oxygen would allow. My father yelled through my door that he’d invited Jacklyn and Rachel to take my grandparents’ place on the cruise. For the rest of the night, I practiced holding my breath by suffocating myself with the bed sheets in short bursts. Though it seems shameful, I was trying to remember what it was like to be in my mother’s tummy. I invested everything in the hope of living with my mother on the cruise ship; that was the only way I could stand to acknowledge the future.

My father and I still hadn't spoken when I left for driver's ed the next day. I pretended it didn't matter to me; I focused on the life I would lead with my mother on the cruise ship. Rachel didn't mention going on the cruise when I saw her, so I assumed Jacklyn declined the invitation. I would keep my cool because what happened in Gainesville didn't matter anymore. After two hours of watching car accident film strips, I let myself into the house, the phone ringing. I told myself to be calm, yet I heaved upon myself the burden of answering that ringing phone. My mission, I dropped my driver's ed binder and dashed into the kitchen, crying out when I knocked my hip on the island counter along the way. "Hello." My voice came out raw, loud, as though I couldn't hear myself.

"Bea? Is that you?"

My eyes welled up; I felt the sting of the injury to my hip, pain softly undoing me, stripping my voice down to nothing, "Mom."

"You sound strange...is everything alright?"

Snot drained into my throat.

"It sounds like you're crying."

"I bumped into the counter." Why was I so clumsy, a wreck? "It hurts." She would think I was a baby.

"Kiss your fingers and put them where it hurts."

I did what I was told, held my hand to my hip even though the pain seemed to radiate beyond it, "okay."

"Good. Bea, did you stop crying? Bea?" Her voice had shaken off most of the gentle patience.

"Yes."

"Okay. Now when you come to visit I'm going to--"

"--I don't know what to bring, Mom. I've never been on a ship. I don't even know the words for it." I gasped for breath.

"It doesn't matter, Honey, everything is color-coded."

"Color-coded?" So were the books in the library.

"You needn't worry."

"Mom, I can't wait." I could feel myself flush, and my speech quickened. "Driver's Ed is so stupid, Mom. The teacher is horrible, but we call him Coach, because he coaches the highschool team--he's just gross and horrible, and Rachel thinks he's fine, but sometimes, Rachel doesn't have a clue. I can't wait to be on the ship."

"Oh my. It sounds as though you've been busy."

I hadn't been that busy. "No, not really. Just driver's education and sometimes working at the library. Rachel has another friend that she probably likes more than me so I've just been at home

reading The Bell Jar and thinking about death.” That wasn’t true, and yet it wasn’t entirely not-true. I sometimes thought of death. Everyone had to, sometimes.

My mother let a silence grow between us before she spoke. “The Bell Jar. Did your father give you that?”

“No. I found it.” Another partial lie. Actually, I’d stopped reading The Bell Jar anyhow. It grated on my nerves. The Esther woman reminded me of the way my father moped and carried on when he’d first started his Bovary book. Being privy to someone else’s pain like that made me feel queasy. I wanted to change the subject: “I can’t wait to get on the boat.”

“Where?”

“Cape Canaveral.”

“No, where did you find the book?”

“School.”

“Oh. Because, well, I have some books you could read. In fact there’s one I’ve been wanting you to read. If you say you have time.”

I didn’t know my mother liked books; I had mostly seen her read thick magazines. She’d done loan advising, so she’d gotten along well enough with numbers. But letters into words into sentences and paragraphs, I had somehow assumed she avoided. “Okay. Sure.”

“In my office area. In a box in the closet next to the filing cabinet, We Have Always Lived in the Castle—it’s one of my favorites.”

What were her other favorites?

“Bea, I’m not going to have much free time when you come visit.”

“What?”

“We’re having a wedding party aboard the ship and I have to prepare extra food.”

How could I believe her? I took the phone to the table and sat down, gingerly, because I still felt strange heat in my hip.

“You see, when it’s last minute like that we all have to pitch in. Make sacrifices.”

Make sacrifices? Who was she? Once my father had said that she was probably going off to join a cult. I hadn’t believed him, but now I wasn’t so sure.

“So what are you saying, exactly? How little are you going to see us? Because—” I pushed the chair back from the table and stood up again. “—Because Grandma and Grandpa aren’t going, and if you aren’t with us it will just be Arnold and me and that’s how it’s been since you left. We might as well stay home.” I was kicking the table leg with the toe of my sneaker.

“Bea, please! I’m telling you this now to be considerate. Please, quiet. I will see you. And don’t call your father Arnold. That makes my stomach hurt.”

I hadn't liked it very much either. It made me feel like his wife, his mother, or Emma—women I didn't ever want to be. "I want to see you. Mom. I want to be on the ship." Then I began to move again; move as though I were still in the driver's ed car, smoothly, purposelessly through space.

Chapter 8

I didn't tell my father about my mother's phone call, just as I hadn't told my mother that he had invited Rachel and Jacklyn on our what should have been our coming-together-as-a-family cruise. Why should I trouble the waters when Rachel was such a whirlwind of inconsistencies? A year ago I would have loved to take a cruise with my best friend, but now, I worried for my heart. It was such a concentrated period of time together—what if she tired of me irreparably? I still had hope Jacklyn would come to her senses about what a disaster it would be to accompany Arnold Elmer Bouvier to the Bahamas. Even if he hadn't been married, my father was no prize. To have a better idea of the situation, I needed to know whether he had asked Jacklyn to pay any of her way. Money changing hands would semi-legitimize the deal. The two non-family members needed to pay at least half what my grandparents had paid, otherwise, in my opinion, my father was taking a girlfriend to meet his estranged wife.

I thought about words I could use to describe what Jacklyn was to my father. Friend, neighbor—neighbor I liked, but that wasn't adequately descriptive. Would he use "neighbor" if he had to introduce her? Friend and neighbor? All others blew clean out of the safe zone: lover, significant other, girlfriend. She couldn't be a significant other, though, because a significant other couldn't be a secret. Significant meant conspicuous. Mistress—I'd forgotten. Adulteress? But, who would say: "This is my adulteress?" My father might. I didn't doubt his tweaked senses of humor and propriety could give birth to something distasteful.

"My daughter's friend's mother" offended me least. Clunky but descriptive. I liked that it cemented my friendship with Rachel while simultaneously offering several degrees of separation between my father and Jacklyn. That my father spent time with Jacklyn bothered me less than the fact that he wasn't spending that time working to repair the relationship with my mother. The thought of something sexual going on between Jacklyn and Arnold Bouvier sickened me—the kind of sick that made me want to annihilate my own consciousness. If I thought about it in a car, I imagined hurling myself onto the freeway. In the kitchen, I yearned to disembowel myself with a carving knife. I'd learned about Hari Kuri from Jacklyn who said it was how Madame Butterfly ended her life. Reading The Bell Jar reminded me of the procedure. In fact, every method of suicide about which I fantasized I'd learned from Rachel's mother or Esther, Plath's protagonist. But I didn't want to end my life—just to snuff thoughts of my father out of it. In that entire summer I never became depressed; I was angry, disappointed, lonely, but like my mother, I'd searched for and found an escape other than death: the ocean.

On my last day of work before the cruise I discovered we had a new batch of books at the library. A man died and left us enough money to buy several dozen items. Nancy, my supervisor, and the most reasonable person I knew, decided that we would buy two-thirds new books and one-third second copies of popular books we already had. This money couldn't have come at a better time because just the other afternoon I'd seen a woman bring back a book with a sticky red smear on the cover. She hadn't been apologetic about it. When the book came to be shelved, I flipped through the pages. A picture book about a rabbit, nearly each drawing had been stained by red fingerprints.

I pictured the woman's tired eyes. She wasn't familiar to me, but I imagined she must have a child or several, and I imagined that she hadn't been watching them when they'd read the book, that she hadn't ever read it to them. The fingerprints were the size of dried beans, a child's prints. My mother had read to me. She had read me Watership Down. My mother had moved the box of tissues from my dresser to my night-stand on the evenings we read the sad chapters. That kind of forethought should have been a parental requirement. Tissues to prevent tear-stained pages. She taught me to touch a book with clean hands. How painful it was that people would take advantage of the library's resources; as a library employee, that bothered me almost as much as the thought of neglected and jelly-stained children. I worried over this so intently that it gave me a headache--I hadn't had a headache in months--a headache from a child's strawberry jelly fingerprints in a library picture book.

I found myself staring into an empty space between the Young Adult stacks. There was a hole in the shelving where a newly popular series of teen mystery-solvers had been borrowed. I was staring, and I forgot where I was for a moment; and that was the moment I saw a little face staring back at me. It giggled. On the opposite side of the stacks, a child, boy or girl I couldn't tell, peered at me through the gap. This child had an exceptionally round face and a nose that, though I'd heard the comparison and never believed it, resembled a button. It was as though a sweet child had been sent to correct my impression of children as slovenly creatures with jelly-stained hands. Once we locked eyes, this child stuck its own funny hand out to touch me.

I offered a finger. We touched, and I smiled, even before the giggling resumed. Its hand hadn't been sticky, "I'm Bea. Who are you?"

"Flora." Then she seemed to turn in on herself. A bashful tuck of the chin and scrunching of the shoulders. Strange how little I interacted with the children at the library, even the throngs of them that arrived weekly for Mother Goose Story Time. Perhaps it was stranger yet how little they interacted with me, as though we'd been separated by the stacks for years and this missing collection of teen books had re-connected our worlds.

"Hello, Bea." It wasn't Flora speaking to me, it was a man's voice, familiar, though unrecognizable--but then I wondered if I could even identify my own father's voice in such a situation.

Whoever it was, I didn't want to answer. Show yourself, I thought, and it troubled me how much drama I could wring out of a moment at the library.

"It's Ralph, your father's friend." He stepped out of the stacks, the little girl in tow. She quickly skipped ahead of him and over to me.

"It's Ralph and Flora," she said with a sense of pageantry. She seemed older now, maybe six, and I relaxed because Ralph had seemed a good influence on my father.

"Are you here to get books, Flora?!" I widened my eyes. I wasn't good at exaggerated faces, and though it probably wasn't true, I assumed children preferred them.

Flora nodded. As soon as I crouched down, she came over to hug me.

"Flora's my granddaughter, Bea. She's here to visit for the week so Mom and Dad can take a vacation."

"And bring me a present," Flora added.

His granddaughter had been named after flowers. I wondered if he'd named her. I wouldn't let my father name my child. He'd probably want to call it Emma. The possibility of having a child was less overwhelming than the idea my father would feel some rightful claim to naming it.

"Do you have any recommendations, Bea?"

Yesterday my mother had recommended a book to me. What would I tell this girl? I knew nothing about her. I thought of Mr. Beasley. "Do you like bears?"

She shrugged. "I like cats." The "s" sound on cats stretched on.

"What books have you read?" I didn't know many cat books so I tried another approach.

"Her parents just read her Charlotte's Web."

"I like pigs." Flora giggled.

A wall of bound spines faced me, and yet I couldn't read a single title. It was the first anxiety attack of my life, and I didn't know how to breathe. I felt them waiting, their open faces, the silence between us; I didn't want them to look at my hot face, burning cheeks. I grabbed a book and covered my face with it. "Let me ask Nancy."

By the time I'd made it to the office, I'd begun to shake. I was holding a book about early trains, and my hands left sweaty prints on the book's plastic-sealed cover. How I'd embarrassed myself! I worried not only for me, but for my father. He needed a steady friend such as Ralph. Ralph was supposed to watch my father's garden when we took our cruise, and I wanted Ralph to give my father advice on life. It wasn't that I knew Ralph, really, but I trusted him. That was no small thing.

"Beatrice?" Nancy called from the front desk. I didn't answer. She would have to come to me. As I sat in one of the wooden break chairs I realized how difficult I'd become. Nancy was getting up. What had happened to trustworthy, stable, and precocious Bea Bouvier? I was a teenager on the edge, a teenager who could hardly read anymore.

“You’re all sweaty?” Nancy took a tissue to my forehead, blotted gently. “What happened?” My voice came out in a rasp, “I got nervous. They wanted me to recommend a book.”

It sounded infinitely more pathetic when I said it out-loud. I didn’t want to be pathetic, not around Nancy, Ralph, not around Rachel, and certainly not when I saw my mother.

“Who were they?” Nancy held my arm as though she worried I might topple out of the chair.

When I became scared or sad, I melted into a ten year old. I didn’t look so mature as it was, my short hair, kids’ t-shirt and sneakers. “Customers.” For a moment I felt her concern. It was a warmth around me, gaze gently resting on my face. “You don’t have to help me. Help them,” I added.

“Honey--”

I think I mumbled, “The customer is always right.” Nancy told me to stay where I was. She had children all grown up, kind of like Ralph, I figured. I described Flora and Ralph, and Nancy went to the stacks to smooth things over. I hoped Nancy showed Flora the children’s reading corner where Mr. Beasley lived. Although I was usually possessive of the stuffed bear, I felt that Flora would respect his delicate ears and the fur rubbing off around his nose. When they all came back to the desk a few minutes later, Nancy told them I wasn’t feeling well. She said something had been “going around.” Ralph was “sorry to hear that.” I hoped he wouldn’t tell my father.

The Bouviers were at it again. People would talk about us, just like when Grand-mere started to slip, when my father paraded her around in her dementia. Or when my mother left. What freaks we were! What I would do if I couldn’t be with my mother on that ship? It was the first time I realized how desperate I’d become. Though I had planned my return to Gainesville after the cruise to finish the summer, driver’s ed, what point was there in that? Why put myself through it, the rest of the summer here, when Rachel didn’t need me, the library didn’t need me; my only hope was that my mother somehow did.

I wanted to feel better as I began my walk home. Nancy had given me a hug as I left the library, the heat had lifted, and I lost myself musing about the ship that would be my new home. Did they have a library on the ship? I would sit for hours in the library, but only if it had a window. I hoped my mother’s quarters would have windows, although I couldn’t imagine a chef stuck in a windowless room. If the library on the ship didn’t have any job openings, I would work as my mother’s sous chef. I would do the stirring and leave her to the knives: Bea on spoons, Anne on knives. I grinned, unable to help myself. The cars going by, the bicycles, anyone could see Bea Bouvier grinning like a madwoman, grinning hard enough to eclipse the memory of the phone conversation with my mother. In less than a week I would see her. She would spend time with me; she would need me.

When I entered the house the sweetness nearly doubled me over. Guava, mangos, and papaya, the atmosphere dripped tropical, as though the furnace were leaking a can of fruit cocktail. I wanted to yell for my father, but the air between us still rankled with lost ladybugs. Instead, I continued into the kitchen. My father stood in the living room next to a floor lamp which was smoking. He saw me.

“Scented oil—the damn valve in the cap was loose.”

My mother had never used scented oils. Occasionally, she burned candles.

“Could you smell it when you came in?” He had made a mistake, and now he had to forgive me, at least partially, for what I’d done on purpose.

“It’s strong, Dad.”

“I don’t want to open the windows with the heat out there.”

What time did he think it was? “Dad, the sun’s setting. It’s cool.”

He went over to the wall and unplugged the lamp, just yanked the thing out of the socket by the cord. It stopped smoking then.

“Let’s open the kitchen window. And the back door.”

It occurred to me then that he might have lost weight since our trip to the gym. His shorts were tight, but I hadn’t seen them for a couple of summers. The waist was too high, the legs too short, and the deep navy fabric made it look as though he were wearing an inkblot. As a teenager, I was under pressure to dress in a way that would help me blend in with my peers. My father exerted a similar pressure on himself, but to what end, I wasn’t sure.

“The bottle of fragrance oil said ‘tropical breeze.’ I wanted to get us ready for the Bahamas.” He laughed, and we headed into the kitchen. “Bea, what do you think about picking up a pizza at Satchel’s? By the time we get back, the house should be livable again.”

I loved Satchel’s pizza; when I was younger I’d had a babysitter who waited tables there. I used to beg for Satchel’s almost daily. Dad had never been a big fan. “You want pizza?”

“I don’t want to cook. And we haven’t had it in a while.”

The screen door breathed in a gust of cool, fresh air, and I let it wash over me. “Sounds good, Dad.”

I fell frighteningly easily into line, as though weeks of my father’s erratic behavior could just fall away if he bought me a pizza with artichokes and peppers. I was just a child, and all children, I believe, want nothing more than for things to be simple and happy. I didn’t want to have to think about why my father wanted to regain my affections. I wanted to eat my pizza, climb into bed, and curl up with the book my mother led me to.

I closed my eyes during most of the driving lesson. Just days before the cruise, I wanted to keep my vision free of Coach Grubb as much as possible. He wore a ball cap that said “World’s Best

Dad,” and although I silently pleaded for Rachel to ignore this morsel of idiocy, when it was my turn to drive, she asked him about it: “You know Mr. Grubb, you’re not the only man with that hat.”

“Don’t tell my boys.” He rubbed the side of his face.

“How many boys do you have?” Why did Rachel provoke the man?

“Four boys. A couple of ‘em are getting on young men.”

I smirked then, because while Coachie meant his boys were growing up, teenage vernacular interpreted “getting on” someone as making out.

“They go to St. Augustine’s and Dowling High.” Coach Grubb sounded proud. It was true, even I knew it, that the private schools had a better athletic program than Gainesville High. I was just glad Coach didn’t have a daughter. Or maybe that was part of the problem—too much testosterone in the house.

“Do they have girlfriends?” Rachel asked. I threw her a glare via the rear-view mirror.

“They do alright for themselves.” Coachie smirked. “I’m pleased with their tastes.”

I had to slam on the brakes.

“What the?”

We stopped inches short of a Lincoln Towncar’s back bumper. My heart hurt with the mistake I’d almost made. It was safe to say I wouldn’t be getting full points for today’s drive. But I didn’t want Coachie’s sleazy points. “Sorry Rachel.”

“And I thought I’d be the crazy driver between us,” she said.

“You’re damn lucky you didn’t hit that car. Look, people in the cars around us are staring.”

Coach folded his hands in his lap, a gesture of resignation I sometimes saw from my father.

Rachel came to my rescue. “Don’t worry, Bea. Everybody gawks at Driver’s Ed cars. Just concentrate on the road.” She was a sensible girl sometimes.

“Thanks, Rach.”

Coach Grubb was none too happy when we told him we’d miss two classroom sessions and a driving lesson. He claimed that the paperwork we received on the first day of class said we couldn’t miss anything if we wanted to get our certification. Then he wailed on about how he would “love to take a cruise,” but he was a teacher and sacrificed his own pleasure for the good of his students (I saw Rachel roll her eyes at the mention of Coach’s “pleasure”). Coach decided we should make-up the lesson before we set sail. He scheduled us for the next day. When I protested, he threatened to kick us out of the program without a refund. This sent Rachel spinning. She jabbed me with her elbow and agreed to Coach’s demand. At least Rachel and I would be hanging out together.

I had only seen one locust during the month of June, but as Rachel and I walked home from the driving lesson, I saw another. I hoped she didn’t see it because I disliked the crisp rustle of the wings

when crushed by the sole of Rachel's sandal. The fireflies had come out and I pretended that they were low stars in the distance. Rachel hummed, abruptly stopped—she saw the locust in the grass—how our eyes were fixed upon it? Strange that we could see something so insignificant, zero in on something so small in a big world. She crossed in front of me, bent her head over the bug.

“Remember when we could catch them by the handfuls?” Rachel crouched down, but instead of staying in a squat, she took to her knees. I saw her run a finger down the creature's spine—if it even had one, I wasn't sure.

“That kind of summer hardly ever happens.” I rubbed my stomach under my t-shirt; the sweat had dried.

“Beatrice says that a locust plague is rare.” She smiled without taking her attention away from the specimen. I wasn't sure what I'd meant, just that I didn't want to think before I spoke, I didn't have the energy for that when I had to save everything for the moment when she would kill the locust and I would have to close my ears to the sound. It was coming. She would kill it.

“Touch him.” She looked at me now. It waited in her palm. She didn't appear to be detaining it, and yet it stayed.

“I don't want to,” there were hundreds of thousands of stars or lightning bugs I'd have rather touched. “It's not moving. It's dead.”

“They don't breathe, Bea. He doesn't have to move unless he wants to.”

Rachel didn't notice then, but I convulsed. Like a rubber band snapping between my shoulder blades, I shook. Her hands were larger than mine. The bug sat in the middle, still, an unholy stigmata. I had shaken from disgust. “Put it down. Now. Rachel, put it down.”

“What the fuck?”

I smacked her hand and she dropped it. It bounced. Before she could push me away I prepared to put all of my weight into my left foot, and still I couldn't step on it.

“What's wrong with you?”

“Rachel, it's dead.” I pulled her along. “Please, let's go--”

“--Are you losing your mind? Do you hear voices?” Rachel wrinkled her nose and studied me. “I'll come with you but only if you admit that you're losing it.”

“I'm losing it.” Our arms locked together, and I would have dragged her home. Only I didn't have to.

“Just when I think I don't understand you.” Rachel's gait lengthened and I was the one trying to keep up. “You do something that makes sense.” Not stopping, she kissed me on the cheek; the strangest and wettest, most open kiss I'd ever received. Her feet tumbled along after her mouth, and she ended with suction and her teeth.

I had never felt another human being's desperation so palpably. I'd found Grand-mère crouched in our broom closet next to the vacuum sweeper, and I'd seen my father choking on his own mucus and tears at her funeral; but no one had ever brought me into that world through touch.

Two days before we left for the cruise and Rachel and I were back in the driver's ed car as though we had never left it. Eleven in the morning and there was so much humidity in the air that from the back seat I could hardly hear what Coach and Rachel were saying in the front. Nobody believed me when I said heat and humidity affected my hearing. But it did. I could picture it: the steamy water molecules swimming through the air and flooding my ear canal. They crowded my ear drum. I couldn't see clearly either. The sun posed maliciously in the sky, too high and too bright, the kind of sun that reminded me of ozone depletion and cancerous cells.

According to Coach, the A/C in driver's ed car had broken since the previous day. A breeze came through the open windows, except it felt thick as cream cheese, not cool. I wanted to listen to what Coach said to Rachel, but I couldn't hear it. I angled myself to watch Coach's mouth move in the rearview mirror. He was too twitchy for that. I closed my eyes and tried to melt into the upholstery. I would reconstitute myself when my turn to drive came. This was the last of it. I sighed. This was the end. But not in a morbid way, just that I was wrapping up this part of my life. One day I would laugh about it. With whom? My mother? Rachel? Nothing was certain, and I half hoped I wouldn't be able to remember driver's ed well enough to laugh.

Then the car was silent, the breeze gone. I opened my eyes. Rachel had stopped at a traffic light. I heard the scratching of Coach's pencil. She started driving again. Before I could close my eyes, the car stopped. Rachel had evaded a car that hadn't seen us. For the first time today, I could understand most of what Coach said: "Good defensive driving." My heart beat faster, I breathed faster too, but Coach sounded as calm as ever. He seemed to show us that no matter the situation, a seasoned driver's ed instructor felt no fear.

I felt fear. Fear in my gut, my bowels, even—it sounded gross, but my insides cramped and churned; I had to tell myself I would be okay. Rachel's drive was nearly over. I could tell because we passed the Planned Parenthood just blocks from the high school. Apparently, it was a high school joke--which girls had to walk to the Planned Parenthood after school to get abortions. High school jokes sounded horrible. I took deep breaths.

When Rachel pulled into the GHS parking lot, Coach gave her a pat on the back. Only, it looked more like a paddle on the back because he was vigorous about it, and then he squeezed her shoulder and shook her a little. He told her good work.

I didn't like this.

It happened quickly, but I didn't like that he touched her at all. Math teachers didn't touch students who'd mastered the quadratic equation. Why did Coachie need to touch Rachel? I popped out of the backseat with more energy than I'd had in days. It was my turn in the driver's seat; I was Coach's problem now.

"We almost died!" Rachel reeled into me and gave me a hug. "We almost died, Bea!"

"Did we?" I asked. Perhaps I hadn't understood the gravity of the situation. I assumed she referred to the moment that had inspired Coach's "Good defensive driving" comment, but, what did I know?

"That was amazing," she squealed.

"Wouldn't have been so amazing if your pretty face had gone through the windshield," Coach said. "I had to use my set of pedals, don't forget." He remained buckled in the passenger's seat.

"Come on now, Beatrice. Get in and set your mirrors."

Rachel squeezed my hand, and we traded places. The seat felt warm, hot even. I expected the wheel to be hot, maybe even too hot to touch with bare hands. But it was fine. And there I was next to Coach and his clipboard. He held that clipboard with one arm, almost cradling it in the crook of his elbow. I didn't notice before—how hadn't I noticed—but today he wore baseball shorts. Short shorts in that foamy fabric gym teachers favored. Curly brown hair had colonized his legs, and his thighs smashed regretfully against the plastic upholstery.

Even worse, up close, Coach smelled. The car smelled like bad cheese, and Coach smelled like cafeteria hot dogs--like parts of the pig people shouldn't have to eat.

"How're your mirrors, Beatrice?"

I hadn't checked them yet. I tried to make eye contact with Rachel, but she wasn't looking into the rearview mirror. "Fine," I lied. Rachel was taller than me. I began to adjust my seat, then, the mirrors.

"You'd be amazed by the number of students who failed driver's ed because they forgot to check their mirrors," Coach said.

"Yeah, Bea, check your mirrors." Rachel kicked my seat, but instead of annoying me, the kick was a jolt of solidarity. Rachel was with me, behind me. Last time I'd put the key in the ignition my hand had shaken. Today, I started the car without a problem.

"Alright. We've all got our seatbelts on, right?" Coached liked to ask this question. Lilly's brother told Rachel that Coach had gotten in trouble for failing to monitor the buckling of students in the backseat.

Coach instructed me to drive over to the university. I had to drive through campus and then drive around it. It made me nervous to be on campus. My dad was on campus teaching students, grading students, or writing more gunk about Emma Bovary. I didn't want my dad to see me drive. I

felt vulnerable as a student driver, and I didn't want my father to know that. I didn't want him to see me make a mistake.

I wasn't making mistakes so far. My stops had improved tenfold—Rachel no longer complained of being thrown against her seatbelt when I braked. My foot learned to apply slow, steady pressure, and I relaxed my grip on the steering wheel. My heart beat slightly faster after my first left turn, but I believed avoiding cars from both directions was a legitimate challenge. For all my hard work, Coach Grubb wasn't very responsive. Every time I looked to him, his head was turned towards the backseat. He was having a conversation with Rachel! Rachel, who, according to her image in the rearview mirror, was giggling.

"I don't know where to go now, Coach," I said. I bit the inside of my cheek. He was supposed to watch me, not make Rachel giggle. My father had written a check for one hundred twenty dollars so I could take this dumb course. Coach Grubb was supposed to pay attention to me. "Where am I going?" I shouted.

"Easy, Beatrice," Coach said. "You're doing fine. Take a right onto University Blvd—that's the street with the palm trees on the medians."

"And the graffiti," Rachel said.

"I know that." I knew which street University was. Only a baby wouldn't know that. Or Grand-mère. And five of those palm trees weren't just palm trees. They were memorial trees for the victims of the Gainesville serial killer. Maybe Coach was a serial killer? He fit the profile: white, male. I didn't know if he'd wet the bed, but it seemed feasible. He could kidnap any student he wanted. My father was busy being an academic, and Jacklyn was busy being weird: if Coach stole Rachel and me, who would notice?

I accelerated. My world went streaming by. And it went faster, and I should have taken my foot off the gas. I just didn't know what to do. There were a dozen cars on the road around me; they all knew what to do. I didn't know. Red cars, brown cars, blue cars gleaming in the sun. I needed help. Coach yelled for me to take my foot off the gas, but I didn't—somehow I couldn't—for just a few seconds too long, I couldn't move. Coach braked with his set of pedals just as I did with mine. Rachel screamed. The car spun. I drove us into the trunk of a palm tree.

The impact came on Coach's side. Rachel and I walked out of the car ourselves. Coach got pulled out and put on a stretcher. They slid him into an ambulance.

We went to the hospital too, together in another ambulance. Rachel and I got CT scans of our middles. The technician asked me if I was pregnant. She said it would harm the baby if I was pregnant and they couldn't do the scan. I shook my head. Rachel would be asked the same question. We were old enough that medical people had to ask that.

We had swelling and bruises (the doctors called it a seatbelt sign), but we got to go home. No real damage. Coach had to stay. His wife and kids had come to the hospital before Jacklyn or my father arrived. We'd seen his wife. Rachel said his oldest son was hot. By the time she said that we'd each been given a boat load of ibuprofen to deaden the pain. Rachel seemed amused by the whole thing. She said it was cool: we had defied death--only Coach had been vulnerable. She said it felt amazing. I shook my head at her. I'd almost killed someone. But Rachel and I had gone through it together, and she was right, we had defied death. As far as I knew, that was something Lilly had never done.

My father drove me home. He said he loved me. He said it twice, and then again. He said he'd made shish kabob for dinner but quickly told me I didn't have to eat anything if I didn't feel like it. He would bring me plenty of water and pain killers. I didn't have to do anything. He wasn't mad. "Just rest," he said. He'd always wanted Grand-mere to rest, "Just rest." Her body never seemed to want to.

He tucked me into bed--something he'd only watched my mother do. He pulled the sheets tight around me. He took it too far, tucked them in on the sides, tight, and I felt like a burrito. My father worked upstairs so I wouldn't have to yell when I needed something. He'd provided me with the decorative ceramic bell from the living room. I rang it. He brought me a glass of orange juice with a straw so I didn't even have to sit all the way up.

I soon fell asleep, but I spent my last waking hours wondering if I should tell my mother about what I'd done. She'd once said that Gainesville was easy to navigate by car. It was a perfectly gridded city. The streets were paved at right angles, and most were numbered. The imposed order had been strange to her when she and my father had moved here. It was an alarming contrast to the grass and leaves, trees, weeds, and flowers that grew out of anyone's control. When my father first started gardening a couple years ago, my mother said that for him the pleasure wasn't in what he grew, but what he prevented from growing.

No one had said it yet, but I was sure I wouldn't be allowed to continue the driver's ed course. I didn't want to either. I reminded myself that it didn't matter either way. I would live with my mother on a ship. I would see my mother on a ship. I would continue my life on a ship. My thoughts snagged and caught, like a loose piece of clothing in the wheel of a bicycle. I didn't know what I would do if I couldn't live on that ship---nor whether my mother even wanted me there.