JOHANNA HUNTING

Queen Elizabeth and Brigitte Bardot

My mother loved to touch Sonia's long blonde hair. "Like corn silk," she'd say, as she gathered it in her hands. It was the hair my mother had had when she was a girl. She'd even shown Sonia photos, faded prints with rounded edges. She said it was so weird that *I* didn't get that hair—and didn't seem to quite believe me when I came home from school one day, triumphant at having learned in science that blonde hair was a recessive trait—that I couldn't possibly have been blonde, since everyone on my dad's side had dark brown frizz. Still, I'd begun to feel concerned about how I looked. Toward the end of sixth grade, I started to wake up earlier, an hour and a half before it was time to leave for school, to wash, blow-dry, and iron my hair straight.

School got out for the summer. I spent most of June and July at Sonia's. She lived in a large, salmon-pink stucco house with her parents and older sisters, Heloise and Nathalie, two spaniels, and six horses. I loved the jumble of jackets hanging from the pegs inside the back door, the bench piled with black velvet riding helmets—the overlap of who wore which one.

My mother was glad when she could drop me there, so that I wouldn't be left at home by myself. I'd gone to camp the previous summer, but this year she couldn't afford it. She was working as a real estate agent, not making much money. She'd show people house after house—and then abruptly stop hearing from them. She called that getting burned; it happened all the time. If Sonia's mother, Martine, who didn't work, was out, Nathalie was usually giving riding lessons in the ring. We were going into seventh grade anyway, old enough to be left pretty well alone. We still liked to play with Barbies, would spend hours dressing them up for "the dance"—but we wouldn't have wanted anyone in our class to know about it.

Our mothers became friendly, too. Martine was French, a free-spirited woman who wore cropped sweaters and jewelry—necklaces of beads frosted like sea glass or spindly limbs of coral—not the kind of thing you could buy at the mall. My mother had traveled to Europe when she worked as a flight attendant in the early '70s, and when she described something in a positive way—an outfit, a dessert—the adjective she typically used was "French." When she came to pick me up in the evenings, she'd gratefully accept Martine's offer of a glass of wine,

and they'd chat in the kitchen while Martine made dinner. She didn't just make spaghetti or stir-fry—she would bake whole fish stuffed with lemon slices, or prepare cheese soufflé.

Sonia's father, Richard, was not French. He was short, a head shorter than Martine, with a bald, liver-spotted scalp. He ran a company that manufactured plumbing fixtures and fittings and expected to be treated as the boss. If he came home while my mother was still there, he'd barely acknowledge her, would just tell Martine she ought to hurry up already with dinner. My mother, used to charming men with her smile and naive questions, was frustrated by him. She had just started dating—had gone out with our dentist and a guy she'd met at the wine store. She said Richard didn't like her because she was divorced. Married men didn't like divorced women, didn't want their own wives to get ideas.

"Like it's contagious," I said.

Martine took the girls to the South of France for the month of August, to a stone house she owned with her siblings, where she'd spent summers as a girl.

I was supposed to go visit my dad, but he called and told my mother that it just wasn't a good time. My mother said that he was an idiot and we should feel sorry for him, but I felt more sorry for myself. I'd bought a guide book to Philadelphia, where he'd been living for a year and I'd never visited, had highlighted various attractions: the Franklin Institute, the Magic Gardens. I put the book under my bed.

On Saturdays when my mother didn't have to work, we'd wake up early and drive to Singing Beach in Manchester-by-the-Sea, with sand that squeaked as you walked along it. We missed Sonia and Martine, wondered what they were up to, what the beach they went to looked like. The region in France where they had their house was known for its rosé, and my mother started drinking that in the evenings.

My mother had one listing of her own, where she'd host an open house most Sundays. The sellers would leave clutter on the counters and dishes in the sink that she would have to quickly tidy up. I went along with her, helped her puff the pillows and open all the blinds. Then I wandered around the rooms with the prospective buyers, pretended that I was one of them—tested the bathroom faucets and opened the closet doors. When I got tired of that routine, I sat and waited on the creaky swing set in the backyard. It was a wooden house like ours, but painted yellow rather than white. It felt a lot bigger than our house, but my mother said it had the same number of square feet. Sonia had told

me her house didn't seem big to her—it was funny how once you got used to a place, you could no longer tell what it was like.

During the week, I alternated between the TV in the kitchen and the one in the living room, watching *The Price Is Right* or *Murder, She Wrote*. My mother said that if I was so bored, I could vacuum or at least unload the dishwasher. When she was my age, she'd babysat for three different families.

I had assumed Sonia would call me as soon as she got home, but it was my mother who heard first that Martine and the girls were back in town, had been for a couple of days. I biked over to their house and found Sonia lying on the living-room couch with our summer reading book, *Watership Down*.

"What's up?" I said.

She sighed and flung down the book. "I wish my family still lived in France."

She'd gone out dancing with her cousins and sisters almost every night. And she'd had her first two kisses. Both boys so handsome: Mathieu, a local, and Alistair, from London. The most exciting thing I'd done was grow a tomato plant in a terra-cotta pot.

It was too hot to ride horses or mess around in the barn. I thought we might play Barbies, but Sonia said she didn't feel like it. I'd brought my bathing suit, a navy-blue racerback, but she offered me one of her two-pieces instead. In the kitchen, she rubbed the cut side of a lemon all over her hair, passed me the other half. We turned on the sprinkler and jumped back and forth through the rake of cold water until Nathalie, who was napping in the nearby hammock, moaned that we were being too noisy. I was scared of Nathalie, who wore her hair in a perfect dark braid and had told my mother that I lacked confidence—most of her students who had taken so many lessons would be jumping by now. Sonia competed in horse-jumping shows most weekends and had the satin ribbons strung up all the way around the canopy of her bed to prove it. My mother said that unless I loved riding, I'd better stop taking lessons, that they weren't cheap.

We walked past the barn, along the dirt path that we sometimes rode down, to the pond. Sonia slung her towel around her neck; I wrapped mine around my waist. We walked along the water's edge to the widest strip of beach, careful to avoid the sludgy duck crap, and stretched out our towels, angled toward the sun.

"In France, everyone sunbathes topless," said Sonia.

I thought maybe she was testing me. "Yeah, right."

"It actually makes a lot of sense because then you don't get tan lines," she said.

I had thought that tan lines were half the point of tanning—if you didn't have a strip of contrasting white skin, then you couldn't really tell—or brag about—how tanned you'd got.

Sonia pointed out that you'd still have a tan line on your butt and everything. She tugged at the bow behind her neck and her triangle top came loose, then undid the string behind her back. Her breasts hung from her chest, whereas mine barely stuck out. "Let's start on our stomachs," she said. She settled on her towel and, propped up slightly on her elbows, began to read her book.

I looked around to make sure no one was coming.

"It's not a big deal," said Sonia.

My top, the one she'd lent me, was bra-styled, with hooks in the back. I pulled my arms out of the straps, so that my chest was still just covered, and lay down on my stomach.

She looked at me and frowned but didn't say anything.

I unhooked the back of the top, let it fall off onto my towel.

"If anyone comes"—she looked left and right—"which they won't. You just have to act totally natural, OK? That's what my cousin said. It's only weird if you're self-conscious."

"OK."

"Don't you feel better?" said Sonia. "It's freeing, right?"

I did feel more comfortable—and less hot. We lay on our stomachs for a while, until our backs started to crunch, then flipped. It was hard to read lying flat on your back, so we just talked, looking up at the sky. Sonia fanned her hair out behind her, so that she looked like she was floating in water, and I did the same.

"I hope we get good new people, good boys," she said. Seventh grade was starting in just a couple of weeks, and our class would double in size.

I was dreading every aspect of it—the thought of new people, new teachers, different classrooms, more homework made me feel queasy. But I agreed with Sonia. "The boys in our class suck."

Soon I heard her breathing steady. I closed my eyes. My underarms and the crooks of my elbow and knees were sweating. I touched my hair—the lemon juice had made it clump together and harden. I wondered if we ought to head back. Nathalie might have gone inside by now, and we could turn on the sprinklers again—or sit on the soft grass instead of on the hard-packed dirt. The pond smelled terrible. Then I

felt a dog brush against my leg, its wet nose and slobbering tongue. I sat up, hugging my knees to my chest.

"Well, if it isn't Brigitte Bardot and let's see, uh, Queen Elizabeth," called Richard as he approached. "I got home early and thought I might take a dip. I guess everyone had the same idea."

"Go away, Dad," said Sonia, without opening her eyes or moving.

The dogs splashed around in the pond. "Nice to see you, too," said Richard. As he came closer and saw that Sonia and I were bare-chested, he stopped, turning his head abruptly, looked up toward the sky, and said, "Put a top on! Jesus Christ. Who do you think you are?" He turned his back to us and whistled for the dogs. They leaped out of the water and shook off, splattering Sonia and me with pond water.

Sonia shrieked. She wrapped herself up in her towel, rushed past him, and ran back to the house. I struggled to keep up.

When I got home, I asked my mother who Brigitte Bardot was. I didn't understand why he'd called her that—"Sonia" didn't sound anything like "Brigitte." I washed the lemon juice out of my still-brown hair.

A few days later, we were browsing in the video store when my mother called out to me. She held out the box for a movie called *Contempt*. "Brigitte Bardot." We rented the movie but both found it too slow. "I think this is a little over your head," my mother said as she ejected the tape. Anyway, I'd seen enough.

Sonia tested out of seventh-grade beginner French. An eighth-grader in her class invited her to his birthday party. "It might be really awkward," she said. "Because I won't know anyone." We'd been riding and were brushing the horses with rubber-toothed currycombs just inside the barn.

"But you'll know him, right?" I pointed out, reaching to brush along the horse's spine. The saddle had left a curved imprint of sweat. "And the other people from your class."

"He said I could bring friends," she said.

"Oh! What will we do—at the eighth-grade party?"

"Dance, I guess. Talk," she laughed. "Normal stuff."

When my mother dropped me off at Sonia's house to get ready on Saturday afternoon, I found her sitting in the kitchen with Daya, a new girl from our year I recognized from orchestra. She played percussion; I played oboe. It was strange to see her outside of school. Sonia was wearing her striped terrycloth bathrobe and Daya was wearing Martine's pink quilted robe.

Daya was leaning over Sonia, spreading eye shadow on her lid with her index finger. "I like to do a really smoky eye," she said. Her family had just moved up from New York.

"Hey, is your mom home?" I asked, lingering by the door.

"I think she's in the bath."

"Did you come over to see her mom?" said Daya.

"No, I just—my mom wanted to know. I'll go tell her she's busy." When I came back into the kitchen, they were both laughing.

"He's on cross-country, too," said Daya. She licked her thumb and rubbed the tip of a black eyeliner pencil.

"Oh, I'm so glad I'm doing it," said Sonia.

"What? You're doing cross-country?" I was shocked not to have heard anything about it. I helped myself to a glass of water, hoping that Daya would see that I knew where the glasses were kept. That I knew better than to ask for ice cubes.

"Yeah, tryouts are on Monday," said Sonia.

"I think everyone makes the team though," said Daya.

"Oh, that's good. I'm not very fast."

"Me neither," said Daya, shaking her head.

"But—why?" I said. We often went riding or helped Nathalie with the horses after school.

"I don't know. I don't want to get fat," said Sonia.

"As if," said Daya. "OK, open."

Sonia's eyes looked bigger than usual; her lids shimmered silver. "No, seriously, you should see what my mom feeds me."

"It's true, she cooks amazing," I said.

"Amazingly," said Daya. She dabbed concealer on Sonia's chin.

If Sonia was worried about getting fat, then I thought I might be fat already. "Maybe I should join cross-country," I said. I pulled out the chair next to her and sat down.

"But you hate running," said Sonia.

"You hate running, too."

"Not anymore, not really." She shook her head.

I considered saying that I might not hate it anymore either, that I hadn't actually done it in a while, but I didn't want her to think I was a follower.

Once everyone's make-up was done, we went upstairs to get dressed. Daya had brought a duffel bag of clothes, which she dumped out on Sonia's bed. I leaned against the end of the bed and watched as they went through it. Daya quickly decided on a black suede skirt and a tube top. There was a coral-colored dress that I almost asked to try on, but

by the time I'd got up the nerve, Sonia had already rejected it, and Daya had packed it away. Sonia tried on several of Daya's things and settled on a red minidress.

"That looks amazing on you," said Daya.

I wondered where Sonia's sisters were. I'd pictured getting ready with their expert advice.

Sonia turned sideways, looked over her shoulder at the mirror, puckered her lips.

"Very *Brigitte Bardot*," I said. I had practiced saying that name in a French accent.

"Ew, Elizabeth," said Sonia. "That's what my dad calls me," she explained to Daya.

Daya rolled her eyes as though she understood. "Is that what you're wearing?"

I was wearing my most "party" dress: light blue, sleeveless, covered in silk ruffles. I'd got it for my cousin's wedding the previous spring. I said, "Yeah, I think so." When I had gotten dressed at home, I'd imagined Sonia was going to tell me I ought to borrow something of hers, but she just said, "You look cute," and tipped her head forward to brush her hair upside down.

We wandered across the hall into Sonia's parents' room. Her mother and father were going out to dinner and said they would drop us at the party on the way.

"Martine, we do not want to be the first ones there. Social suicide," warned Daya, addressing Sonia's mother more directly than I ever had. I wondered how many times she'd been over to Sonia's house. It was only the third week of school.

"Well, we could try to make the reservation a little bit later," said Martine.

Sonia's father, who was lacing up his shoes, said, "Absolutely not." He looked up and noticed for the first time what Sonia was wearing. "Where are your pants?"

"It's a dress, Dad."

"Martine." His face was flushed.

"It's a cute dress, but maybe a little short," she said, holding her fingers a few inches apart.

"You were going to wear those black pants with it," said Daya.

"What?"

"The black pants that I said you should, like, put on underneath." Daya winked—too obviously, I thought, but what did I know?

Sonia ran to get the pants. When she came back, Daya said, "We could take a taxi."

I was surprised to see Martine tilt her head as though she were seriously considering this. I had only ever taken a taxi a handful of times—to the airport—and I was pretty certain that Sonia's family didn't regularly take them either.

"That's a good idea," said Sonia.

Her father said, "We're going to drop you on our way out and pick you up on the way back. And if you and your friends don't like that, you can just stay home."

I didn't know why he looked at me when he said that. I didn't mind what time we arrived at the party.

They dropped us off at Adam's house, which was only a short drive away, in fact just past my house. It was handsome, brick with white columns framing the front door. His mother let us in and said, "Don't you look pretty?" She seemed to be admiring my ruffles. Sonia asked for the bathroom, where she went to take off her pants. The party was in the basement, which felt more like a dungeon because of the black lightbulbs that gave off an eerie blue glow and the smoke machine. I couldn't see my feet, which I thought might be for the best, from the way Daya had been looking at my Mary Janes in the car. Not many people had arrived yet, but the music was blaring.

Adam kissed Sonia on both cheeks. We'd learned about that custom in French class. "*Bonsoir*, thanks for coming," he said. He was wearing jeans and an untucked white shirt, which looked pale violet in the light.

Sonia's hair glowed, too. She introduced Daya and me to him. He kissed Daya twice. He kissed me on one cheek, but as I turned my face for the second kiss, he pulled away, and we wound up brushing lips.

"Ah!" he said, jerking his head back. "What are you doing?" He rubbed his lips with the tips of his fingers.

"Sorry." I was as surprised as he was.

"Oh my god, Elizabeth!" said Sonia.

"I was just doing the cheek-cheek, the French kiss, not the French kiss, you know, the kiss-kiss, the air kiss, like you did." My face felt hot.

"Don't worry about it," said Adam, having regained his cool. "I'll take what I can get." He told us to make ourselves at home, have a soda, eat something, whatever. The room soon became packed with people, the entire eighth grade. I knew most of their names but had never spoken to any of them. I watched Sonia and Daya dance and tried to subtly mimic their motions, but when I looked down, I realized I was hardly moving.

When a slow song came on, Adam emerged from the smoke and wrapped his arms around Sonia. They pressed up against each other so that almost their entire bodies were in contact. Jared, apparently a friend of Adam's, asked Daya to dance. I found myself in the middle of the floor, surrounded by couples, and quickly retreated toward the edge of the room. I poured myself a paper cup of soda and stood back, making tentative eye contact with a couple of guys who stood nearby. They edged away. I sucked on a Cheez Doodle until it dissolved, then crouched down and unbuckled, then re-buckled my shoe. Someone's butt knocked into my head. Finally, I decided to wait it out in the bathroom.

It was locked so I waited just outside. After a long time—a more fast-paced song had already come on—a girl and boy stumbled out holding hands, looking somehow both sheepish and smug. I quickly locked myself in the bathroom, where I stood for several minutes, until someone else tried the door. I didn't bother to turn on the light, just stood there with my eyes closed and breathed in the dark.

Martine was shown into the basement by Adam's mother. I saw her smiling faintly, watching Sonia slow-dance to another song with Adam. I hoped she didn't see that I was sitting by myself in a corner. She waited until the song was over before calling out to Sonia. We followed her up the stairs. Sonia was annoyed at having to leave before the party was over. Daya comforted her, saying that it was good to make a dramatic exit. It was Martine who reminded Sonia to put her pants back on as Adam's mother showed us to the front door.

"You OK, Elizabeth?" she asked me as we waited for Sonia.

"Yeah," I said. "My ears are ringing."

I got dropped off first. I had a feeling that Daya was spending the night at Sonia's. She'd left that bag of clothes.

My mother asked how the party was, and I told her it was fine. She was sitting in the dark, stretched out across the couch, watching a movie.

"And the guy who invited Sonia?" she said. "Are they an item?" She hit pause on the remote.

"I don't know. I guess."

"What's all over your face?" she said. "It looks like you've got soot around your eyes."

I shook my head and explained, "It's the 'smoky' look."

"It looks awful," she said. "Don't get it on your dress."

I turned around so that my back was facing her. "Sonia's doing cross-country, so I can't go to her house after school anymore, and you'll have to pick me up," I sniffled.

"Why are you standing like that? Turn around so I can see your face. You can take the bus home from school. Or you can join the team, too."

"But I hate running." I didn't actually believe that anyone could not hate running.

"You'd probably get in really good shape."

"She's doing it with her other friend," I said.

"What other friend?"

"Daya."

She shook her head, as if surprised that she didn't know Daya, as though she knew any of the new kids in my class, or what school was really like. "Honey, you'll make new friends, too."

I knew I shouldn't have told her. I went upstairs to my room.

At lunch, I had to stick right next to Sonia, follow directly behind, if I wanted to sit anywhere near her. As soon as she put her tray down, a clatter of other trays—Daya's and the rest of the group they quickly established—dropped to surround it. Soon, I gave up trying. I stopped going to lunch, just bought a granola bar from the vending machine and ate it in the library. The funny thing was that when I passed Sonia in the halls, she'd act so friendly, would say, "Hey, Elizabeth!" as though she'd been looking for me.

My mother became closer with Martine. Sonia's dad often traveled for business, and when he was away my mother and Martine would go to a movie screening at the French Library in Cambridge or out to eat. She'd fill me in on the gossip the next morning on the way to school.

The car smelled faintly of coffee—my mother kept an open bag of it in the pocket of her door since she believed it neutralized odors. I was eating cereal very carefully out of a plastic mug. I wasn't really allowed to eat in the car since my mother liked to keep it clean for clients. "Martine's not sure about Sonia's friend Daya," said my mother. "She sounds like a bad influence. Sonia's started smoking. I can't for the life of me imagine why a runner would smoke."

I said, "Who cares? A lot of people smoke." I dropped my spoon into my mug and looked out my window, which was still printed with frost. The car usually didn't get warm enough to blast the defroster until we were almost at school.

"It's such a shame you've fallen out with Sonia. We can't understand it."

I took my flash cards out of my backpack and began quizzing myself—I had a grammar test that afternoon. I was sure that Martine under-

stood, that she was probably just too kind to explain to my mother that Sonia no longer wanted to be friends with me.

"Maybe you should ask her if you did anything to upset her. Honey, did you hear me? You know, maybe if you smiled more, were just a teensy bit more charming." She pulled into the drop-off circle, and I got out and slammed the door.

I don't know if it was my mother's or Martine's idea to try and smooth things over between Sonia and me. One Saturday in the spring, my mother suggested we go to the mall. I needed jeans—I had grown a couple more inches, and all my pants were too short. My mother was looking for a new raincoat for herself but didn't find one she liked for the right price. There were a few different food options at the mall, but we always went to the same place, a café with a black-and-white tiled floor, a long, dark wood bench, and mirrored walls. When we got there, my mother walked right past the maître d' to join Martine and Sonia, who were already seated at a table, perusing the menu. I pulled my mother's arm, glared at her. "I don't want to have lunch with them," I said.

"Smile," said my mother through gritted teeth. They were sitting next to each other on the bench, and my mother took the seat opposite Martine, so I sat down across from Sonia.

We began by talking as a four, my mother describing the raincoats, but once we ordered, my mother and Martine broke off from Sonia and me. I was surprised by how easily we fell back into our old pattern of conversation. By the time we'd finished our chocolate mousses, we were laughing so much that my mother shushed us, fearing that we were disturbing the neighboring tables. I felt as though Sonia had forgiven me for whatever I'd done wrong.

Back at school on Monday, I joined Sonia and her group huddled together at recess. I wasn't looking for her—I was on my way to the library to start on my math homework when I saw her long blonde hair. "Hey," I said, breathless.

She nodded. Daya was telling a story. "And then he said—" She stopped, looked at me. "This is kind of a private story. I mean, no offense, it's just that—"

"Oh, sorry," I said. I smiled.

She smiled back. "No, don't worry," she said. "Do you want to ask Sonia a question or something? Invite her to the dance? She already has a boyfriend, you know."

Everyone laughed.

As I turned away I heard Sonia say, "Why'd you say that? My mom's going to kill me."

My mother got a plane ticket to go visit Martine and the girls in France that summer. I was invited, too, my mother insisted, but when I saw Sonia at school, she didn't mention anything about it. I hadn't been over to her house in months. We barely spoke anymore, even though in homeroom I could always sense where she was without looking directly at her, heard the pitch of her voice clear above the general clamor.

I called my dad, asking him if he would pay for me to go to sleepaway music camp and, to my mother's surprise, he agreed. You had to audition for acceptance, and I began practicing oboe for several hours every day after school.

When she picked me up from camp, my mother gave me the report on how beautiful their old house was, how delicious the food had been. She and Martine had gone to the discothèque with the girls. They'd had the best time. I really should have come.

My mother said she thought Martine was working up the courage to divorce Sonia's dad. Martine had realized that she wouldn't necessarily have to move—since my mother had surmised they'd bought the house mostly with her money—and had begun to consider how much happier she'd be without him. It would be better for the whole family. He was much too strict with the girls. That was probably why Sonia was so naughty—she was rebelling against him.

I don't know exactly what happened, but my mother said that when Martine asked Richard if he'd move out for a trial separation, he went crazy. He said she couldn't see my mother ever again. I remember thinking that my mother deserved it—she'd become too involved with their family.

The first time I stayed for dinner at Sonia's, in the fall of sixth grade, it was Martine's birthday and Richard was away on business. Heloise made a big salad and Nathalie was making some kind of special soup, Martine's favorite. Sonia and I set the table.

Nathalie ladled the soup into bowls and set them on a baking sheet, then paused. "Elizabeth, do you like French onion soup?"

My mother was always warning people I was a picky eater, but I typically ate what I was given at other peoples' houses. "I don't know," I said. "Is it just like—onion?"

"Yeah, onion," she said, nodding, impatient, ladle midair.

I looked to Sonia, who shrugged. "I might not like it," I said.

"It would be a shame to waste it," said Nathalie, nodding. She got rid of one bowl, shared its contents among the other four.

The soup came out of the oven somehow transformed into a bubbling-over, melted cheese–topped, sweet-smelling marvel. Martine came in from outside, sniffing appreciatively, clearly impressed.

Nathalie set down the hot bowls on plates at the table, skipping my place. "You said you didn't want any."

"I know."

"What are you going to eat?" said Martine.

"Salad," I said, and Heloise passed me the wooden bowl.

Everyone began eating in silence, pulling up long, steamy strands of cheese with their spoons, digging into the soggy bread and dark broth.

"You made it just right," said Martine.

Sonia noticed me eyeing her soup, offered me a bite.

"Wow," I said. It was the most delicious thing I had ever tasted.

Martine smiled. After a few minutes, she pushed back her chair and stood up. She set her bowl down in front of me and picked up the salad.

"Mom, what are you doing? I offered her some and she didn't want any," said Nathalie.

"She likes it," said Martine, clearly pleased, as though I were a baby who had eaten my first bite of solid food.

"No," I said. "It's yours."

But Martine just shook her head and sat back down at the head of the table. Nathalie rolled her eyes and even Sonia seemed annoyed.

The last time I saw Martine was the time she came to lunch at our house. Sonia and I were on spring break from ninth grade. My mother prepared what she called a French lunch, something she had never made before. I knew what she meant was the kind of thing Martine used to make. When I came down for breakfast, she was already tending to a leg of lamb, making slits in its purple flesh with a paring knife and slipping in slivers of garlic. She asked me to set the table.

I opened the drawer where the place mats were kept and reached under the stack of straw mats we used every day to pull out the quilted Provençal fabric mats, rectangular with rounded edges bordered blue. Martine used similar ones—my mother had bought them on her visit to the South of France.

Martine was at her house in France when she came down with a kind of flu that didn't go away, had gone to the doctor expecting to get a prescription for antibiotics—or something. That was the previous August. But Martine, who had not seen my mother in a whole year, didn't tell

her she was sick. I'd learned about it first, had overheard some girls in the bathroom at school whispering about how bad they felt for Sonia. My mother had said she was sure I'd misunderstood, or that it was probably some awful rumor, but had snuck over to visit Martine the following morning. When I got home from school, my mother was crying at the kitchen table. The tumor on her brain had already advanced to stage IV. Nathalie, anticipating Richard's return, hadn't let my mother stay long but had agreed to bring Martine over to our house for lunch.

My mother warned me that Martine wasn't talking much anymore but she still understood everything. I had just finished laying out the mats at the places around the kitchen table when my mother looked up and said, "No! Not in here—in the dining room. And not those old, stained mats."

She got out the velvet-lined box where she kept her wedding silver and counted out four sets. "It's a shame Sonia's not coming," said my mother. What she meant was that it was a shame that Sonia and I were no longer friends. I wondered what Sonia had been doing during the past week of vacation. I hadn't been up to much.

We never ate in the dining room. Maybe because I spent so little time in there, it was my favorite room in the house, with its pistachio-green walls and long silk drapes. The windows looked out of the front of the house, onto the street. It was a mild day, and the snow had almost melted. Crocuses had begun to poke out along the edge of the matted, yellow grass.

"*Bonjour!*" said my mother as she opened the door. "*Ça va?*"

"*Bonjour,*" crooned Martine. Her sand-colored hair was clipped in a twist to the back of her head, with bangs framing her face.

My mother kissed her on each cheek, then looked behind her and said, "Sonia! We didn't realize you were coming. What a nice surprise."

Sonia smiled and tossed her hair. She was wearing a gray sweatshirt with a cut-off neck and faded jeans. I felt like an idiot in my orchestra uniform, my favorite thing to wear: a white button-down and long black skirt.

"Let's get Mom inside," said Nathalie. "She needs to pee." She led Martine into the bathroom.

"Her motor function is totally fucked up," said Sonia.

I winced, but my mother just shook her head. "So sad."

Sonia shrugged as though this were too obvious a thing to say.

We followed my mother into the kitchen. She had already sliced the meat and set it on a platter. She tilted the roasting pan to drip the meat juice over the pink-and-gray slices.

"How's your break going?" said Sonia.

"Good," I said. I got myself a glass and filled it with water at the sink, then turned and, leaning against the kitchen counter, said, "How are the horses?"

"What would be nice is if you could fill a pitcher with water and set it on the table," said my mother. She turned to Sonia. "Everything's ready."

"Smells yum," Sonia said, charming as ever. She stepped aside so that I could reach behind her to get the big yellow pitcher off the shelf.

I narrowed my eyes at her, almost asked why she had come. She could have at least called to tell my mother, who had gone to a lot of trouble. But I just handed her the pitcher and said, "I have to set another place."

Sonia held it with both hands and asked my mother in a light, high voice, "Do you have ice?"

When I came back into the kitchen, Martine and Nathalie were standing by the counter. My mother asked Nathalie if she thought the meat seemed too rare, and she shook her head.

Martine looked different than she used to, but not in the way I'd imagined. Her head wasn't misshapen or bandaged. I knew that was probably a stupid thing to expect. She had gained weight—her cheeks were fuller and her stomach looked padded. I couldn't help but wonder if that was a side effect of her treatment, or if she'd just starting eating more since she knew she was going to die.

I must have been staring at her, thinking of this, because my mother told me to come and give Martine a kiss. I approached, not wanting to touch her, afraid of her. I had wished on many occasions that she were my mother. I pressed my face against the cool beads of her necklace.

When she let me go, I gave Nathalie a hug, too. She patted my back, as if to comfort me.

My mother told Nathalie to bring Martine into the dining room and settle her in.

"How's your mom's appetite?" my mother said quietly to Sonia. "Is this way too much?"

"She eats," said Sonia. She nodded approvingly at the portion size. "But she's not so good at cutting food anymore. If you give me a fork and knife—" She sliced the meat into strips and then squares, and cut green beans into stubby lengths, but left the potato gratin intact after testing that it was fork-soft. "Do you have a straw?"

"You know, I'm sure we have some somewhere." My mother frowned. "Straws! I can't find the straws!" She grew frantic, opening all of the drawers and cabinets, dumping stuff onto the countertop. "I just bought them—where did you put them?"

I usually helped her put away the groceries. "I didn't put them anywhere," I said.

"There are some in the car," Nathalie called out from the dining room.

My mother said why didn't I go get them.

It was Martine's car, the one I had ridden in so many times before. It smelled the same inside, both earthy-sour like hay and horses and powdery from her perfume. I found a paper-wrapped straw in the glove compartment and shut the door.

I scooped up a handful of the muddy snowbank and squeezed it in my fist. It was granular, felt more like slush than snow. How long would the car smell like her after she was gone? It seemed crazy that her car, her house, her horses—that anything—would continue to exist without her. When I opened my palm, only a small, hard ball of ice remained. I chucked it into the road, wiped my hand on my hip, and walked back up toward the house.

My mother had finished making up the plates. We carried them into the dining room, where Martine was sitting in front of the fireplace at the head of the table. She looked slightly dazed, staring into a dusty stream of sunlight.

"Are you comfortable?" said my mother. "She's not in any pain, is she?" she said quietly to Nathalie.

Nathalie shook her head. "She's on all kinds of stuff." She smiled at her mother. "But the sun might be bothering her eyes. Is there any way we can—?"

My mother hurried to shift one of the blinds so that the sun was not directly hitting Martine's face. "Is that better? I'm sorry about that, Martine," said my mother. Martine smiled and shook her head, as though it didn't matter.

My mother opened a bottle of wine, even though she usually didn't drink or serve wine at lunch. Not that we ever had people over for lunch, but if we did. She poured some out for everyone, including Sonia and Martine, after Nathalie gave the approving nod—and me. "Just half a glass," my mother said. I tried to act casual, to not smile too much.

"How's Richard? How's Dad?" My mother addressed all her questions first to Martine, and then to Nathalie or Sonia.

"He's Richard," said Nathalie.

"And Heloise? Such a shame she couldn't join us."

"She's well. She's in Mexico with friends," said Nathalie.

"Oh I'm glad to hear that. It's good for her to get away…"

"Yeah, she's taking surfing lessons," said Sonia. "I'm so jealous."

"Wow. Isn't that wonderful, Martine?"

I could barely eat in front of Sonia. The meat stuck in my throat. I was aware the whole time of how much she was eating, what was left on her plate. She picked up her green beans with her fingers and ate them one by one.

Midway through the meal, Nathalie refilled my wine glass, and my mother didn't notice, or pretended not to notice. I began to feel slightly numb, as though I were floating up out of my seat.

"Isn't this nice?" my mother said to Martine. "I wish we had done this more—" Her voice caught and she stopped, took a sip of water, and turned to Nathalie. "Let's do this more often. Whenever she feels up to it, seriously, just give me a call."

Nathalie nodded, said she would, and I wondered if my mother believed her.

After the lamb, my mother served slices of fruit tart, the berries and circles of kiwi lacquered with too-sweet gel. "I don't have to feel guilty about not baking this, right? Since you told me that French women always buy dessert."

Martine smiled.

"Honey, why don't you play your oboe for Martine?" said my mother.

"No, Mom," I said.

"Are you in the orchestra, Sonia?"

Sonia shook her head. "Chorus," she said.

I could imagine Sonia laughing with her friends about how I'd given a recital after lunch.

"Elizabeth's gotten very good at the—" She mimed something that looked more like flute than oboe playing. "Fingers crossed it will translate into some kind of college scholarship. Practices for hours, *hours* a day."

She had no idea what it took to be a musician. But I looked at Martine and her eyes seemed to brighten. I pushed back my chair and was about to run upstairs for my oboe when Sonia said, "We should go. We don't want to hit traffic."

Nathalie agreed. "Have to get back before Dad."

"Please, let us know if there's anything we can do," said my mother. "Anything at all."

We stood on the front steps and watched them help Martine into the car.

"I don't envy those girls," said my mother. She squeezed my hand and I squeezed back. We stood there watching until they had driven clear away.