KIRSTIN ALLIO

Clothed, Female Figure

It wasn't my first family, and I don't have "favorites," but the apartment where they lived was closer to my old apartment than any other I'd worked in, and so I felt loosened, as if my whole body were the tongue of a sentimental drunk, susceptible to love and forgiveness. The mother, Ivy, was a civil rights lawyer, and the father, Wendell, was an artist. He was ten years younger than she was—why should it matter? Because she wore the yoke of someone abused rather than amused by youth's indulgences. Oddly enough she had a boyish build in contrast to her heavy harness, and from my position (I admit there is some dignity in distance), here was a mismatch with which mischievous fairies entertained each other.

New Yorkers do not like to venture too far west or too far east, their compasses set to the moral equilibrium of Fifth Avenue. Ivy and Wendell's building, a narrow brownstone washed down like a bar of soap, was far to the west, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues. Chelsea, Wendell insisted, which even I knew was an affect, used to both mock and elevate his circumstances. From the roof, accessed by a hatch Pollocked in pigeon droppings, you could see the Hudson River. I had been able to see it from the roof of my own first apartment. A sense of hope never failed me, walking west, into the sunset . . . although when I arrived for work it was always cinder gray morning.

Ivy and Wendell slept on a Murphy bed in the living room. It hinged precariously off the wall, reminding me of Russia, where the walls really do fall in protest of their cheap construction. Leah, age six, occupied the bedroom, with a ceiling of antique china. She wore frocks that twisted around her pencil body and her ears pushed through her hair like snouts.

She read to herself, poetry. By our Russian giantess, Anna Akhmatova, Leah had read "Evening"; she had also read Tsvetayeva, and Emily Dickinson.

"She read at three," said Ivy, more dutifully than proudly, I noticed.

"Should I tell you the first words my parents discovered me reading?" Leah quizzed me. She had an unmodulated voice, as high as a sopranino recorder. I would have, in my previous life in the Soviet Union, characterized such a voice as antisocial.

"Sorbital," she enunciated. "Hydrated silica."

I suppose I raised my eyebrows.

"Toothpaste," declared Leah.

By that same, first evening, I had read aloud half of the collected Grimm's fairy tales, cross-legged on the floor of the living room. When she was sure I'd finished Leah rolled over and her belly flashed: hard, green, like a slice of raw potato. "Natasha!" she cried. "I love to listen to your accent!"

Wendell did not like the modern children's books, the ones that came with lunchboxes. Fine with Leah. Besides poetry and Grimm's, she loved lists of ingredients. She had something of a phobia—I use the term as a former professional—regarding compounds. She yearned for the simple.

"Bread and water sounds like a good diet," she said, mournfully. "But do you know how many things they put in *water?*"

There were no doors on the cabinets in the kitchen, due to a campaign against the bourgeois in that house, and Wendell's trumpeted belief in the art of the everyday object. Mismatched student pottery was dustily webbed to dog-eared cereal boxes.

The window in Leah's room was on an airshaft with the diameter of a corpse. I considered all of this close to depravity... although in an unsettling way I wondered if I had brought it with me, imposed a film of sorrow and poverty with my very gaze upon Leah's circumstances.

It was true, she was my first only child. My research, in the Soviet Union, had for a time argued in favor of single child families. In terms of allocation of resources, at our stage of civilization, a single focused beam of light, rather than the messy breadth of competition among siblings, and favorites. Well, according to the posters that slickered my home city, there were no Soviet shortages—of heart or of health—whatsoever.

Leah and I had walked down into the West Village where she was to meet a friend in a slice of park between two angled, intersecting avenues. We both drew to a stop in front of the window of a florist. My English was excellent, but a bald spot in my vocabulary was botany. That spring Leah had found me out: I hadn't known that ivy, her mother's namesake, was that dark diamond creeper with tough stitches into cement and mortar.

"Natasha!" cried Leah happily. "I'll tell you everything!"

"Leah Halloran," I said. "Private tutor."

I saw her smiling down into her sweater, which was a habit she had, and sometimes she'd come back up sucking the collar.

I stood at attention. We let a couple of young women bob past us.

"Lilac," Leah pointed. "And hyacinth." Smugly, "I call them poodle flowers, Natasha."

Oh no, Leah Halloran was not a giggler. Her laugh was a serious matter, and as she pushed it out, now, I knew to remain silent.

The window glass through which we looked was as shiny and cold as chrome. Or, of course, a mirror. There we were. A small woman with short dyed hair beneath a boxy white hat, a triangle of wool coat, and a string of girl coming just to the breast of the woman.

Once Ivy said, testing the waters, "Did your mother work, Natasha?"

I didn't immediately answer, and so she added, needlessly, "Growing up in Russia?"

No, Ivy was not curious about my personal childhood. I understood immediately that she was taking the measure of my judgment of her as a working mother.

And, I suspected, she wanted to know what I knew about her daughter that she didn't.

But I simply winked. "Do I have any choice but to be a feminist in this apartment?"

"Feminist!" She laughed. "It sounds so—the way you say it—May Day! Sputnik!" She hit the air with her fists for our relics.

To wink, in those days, was my constant habit, if not directly, then atmospherically, or at an imaginary bystander, my alter-ego, off in a corner.

I winked again. Ivy looked around to see if Leah was in the doorway. No, Leah was fast asleep, the tape recorder resting on her pil-

low, tape like flypaper catching flecks of sound-dust, so that if she talked in her sleep she could listen to it in the morning.

Before my employment, Wendell had stayed home with Leah, sacrificing his art, but leaving plenty of time to meet the drop-off mothers at Leah's school in the West Village who had just rolled out of bed and into those American blue jeans, pulpy and white at the knees and buttocks.

It was five flights up to Leah's apartment at the top of the brownstone, and the stairs were made of solid black rubber. The walls were tiled, with a black border, and the lights were so dim I supposed they cost the landlord a negative number. Leah never touched the railing, descending or ascending, but pedaled in the air, or rather like a drum majorette marching to her own, hectic heartbeat. I had no difficulty imagining what she had been like as a baby: a root face, an early, succinct talker, a body like a tail, too thin, too expressive.

Just as I don't have "favorites," I would say that I never become "close" to a child or a family. I have always suspected it's a work ethic left over from my previous profession; also, I prefer families who refrain from using intimacy as a means to wheedle extra hours. I prefer families who wish—and are cognizant of this wish themselves—to remain a rather closed unit, penetrated only by the specific terms of my contract.

And yet I would not characterize my particular style as "distant." In fact I have been accused, in one mother's fumbling manner, of "apocalyptic thinking," and by another, giggly with reprobation, "your weather eye, Natasha." Clearly, I've been, at times, overly concerned for the safety and well-being of my charges.

I stayed three years, until Leah's parents separated. I had begun to notice that Ivy seemed not so sad as tired, and I admired that, I thought to myself, a mother refusing sadness. I knew that money was tight, in fact Leah had told me, with a child's candor, and I suggested they didn't need me. Ivy said I was very intuitive, and gracious. With Ivy's excellent letter of reference, I was able to find employment almost immediately with a family in Nyack.

It is true that over the years I thought of Leah. At first, it was practical: how would Ivy manage to take her to the museum class she

loved so much on Wednesday evenings? Those lovely little leather sneakers—would they last through the season? Would she succeed in making friends with that tall black girl at school she so admired? And once I even heard her voice, a rather comic announcement, "Whoever's in charge of me pours my soy milk." But then, of course, I had new sets of children to think about... and in my imagination the apartment between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues and my old, first apartment began to swirl together so that I had to think of both, or neither.

I certainly never keep records: in some cases I can't even remember all of the names of the family members. If there were previous marriages, children in college who visited their little half-siblings over long autumnal weekends.... In one case, well, I can picture his two-seater sports car, and the wrinkles on the seat of his suit jacket, but I simply cannot remember the name of the father. Why spend so much time on him? Why not his children? The boy, Harrison, wore a fireman's hat for a year, even, and I suppose especially, in the bathtub; the girl, Morgan, collected pandas.

In any case I don't take solace looking back. I don't take solace at all, and I take my coffee black, which is unusual for a nanny. Nannies are notorious for their sweet tooth, and while every Russian dreams of drinking coffee when he gets to America, he's without fail stricken homesick and tea-addled upon arrival. I am the exception, in both groups I claim membership, to such material and sentimental happiness.

It was last Saturday when I heard my employer's appraising step along the attic hallway that leads to the little room that comes with my paycheck. I have calculated how much is subtracted in "rent," but in this suburban neighborhood it is difficult to compete with the stream of au pairs from Thailand who accept a salary that assumes caring for children is as breezy as summer camp. They are accustomed to summer camp—back home twelve little siblings are waiting.

I rose to greet her. My defense, as always, is formality. My current employer is a female doctor. She is tall, and forced to bow her neck beneath the attic roof, the suggestion being that her own house oppresses her. As a hobby, she figure skates, and I believe figure skating is her true nature. That it fails to bring her recognition...

"Oh, Natasha!" said my employer, feigning surprise at finding me in my own private corner. "Here's this—" she held out a rather bulky letter, laden with small stamps, as if someone had a tedious math assignment. I had the impulse to snatch it up, but it seemed essential that I measure my response: that it be equal, exactly, to my employer's.

"Thank you, Virginia." There was a pool of quiet around us.

"It's so quiet up here," said Virginia, taking a breath of air distilled by the attic. I remained expressionless. The envelope passed between us.

"Is Colin napping?" I inquired.

"A miracle," said Virginia. I nodded as if to excuse her.

"Oh, Natasha. Would dinner at six be possible?" said my employer.

My day off was always cut short. If I pressed, I could get an evening to make up for it during the week, but I rarely bothered.

"Or shortly before..." added Virginia. She looked at me curiously. I was aware that it would have seemed more—normal—if I told her from whom I had received a letter. It was true: at this address, I had never before had mail.

Very calmly I walked over to my desk with the letter. Of course I had scanned the return address. A woman in my position can't afford not do. I placed it on my desk and turned back to my employer.

She said, "Five forty-five-ish?" I nodded once, curtly.

Dear Natasha,

I'm writing you from college. Taking it for granted that you remember me, Leah Halloran? I would have written before but did you know that you are the invisible woman? I actually had to get a boy here to help me find you. He is the original computer geek, very sweet, will do anything because he is from Ohio.

My college is one of those Vermont enclaves that used to be all women, with a name that sounds like high tea in Britain, so that now it's not so much co-ed as college for the sensitive. I've given myself away—sensitive. An artist like my dad. My mom is still the only one who makes an honest buck in the family. I rent a room off-campus, in the town, perched over a man-made waterfall. I look across the dam at the abandoned mill buildings from the 1800s. Sometimes I take pictures of townies from my

windows. You know, girls with laundromat hair who walk like fat babies? Kind of voyeuristic, but what am I supposed to do, snap shots of trees and historic cottages? I impressed my photography professor, anyway, who is British. Gavin. He gets a lot of washings out of that accent.

You can see my photos for yourself, anyway. I'm sticking a few in the envelope.

I can only describe the sensation on reading Leah's letter as a welling up—was it self-satisfaction? I had done nothing to deserve it, and it certainly wasn't a feeling of completion. No. If anything, such a welling up (never would I have been so sloppy in my descriptions as a psychologist!) was a sensation of business *un*finished.

I do like my work, although I have been harsh, perhaps, in my description of Virginia. But I find it so demanding in its requirement of vigilance, that it would be unusual for me to—to allow a moment to feel "self-satisfaction."

What I felt was more like hope—already—that Leah would keep writing.

I finished the letter, and read it all over. I've received Christmas cards from a few of my families, Happy Holidays, the Xs, no more, and I've never expected it. But now I was absurdly, uncontainably excited. How could I rush through time and space to reach Leah?

All capital letters, slanting strongly toward the right-hand margin. Now I was almost sure I'd had a dream—Monday?—about Leah. Could I even have predicted, or willed the letter? How many dreams, I wondered, go unremembered if they are not *fulfilled*, somehow? How reliant are we on the world—I wondered, wildly, euphorically—to supply a coincidence to trigger our memory?

I searched my dream and it seemed, perhaps obviously, that the dream Leah was not the child I remembered (whose dreams are photographic?), nor was she a sort of projection, one of those artist's renderings of a kidnapped child, now grown up, and likely still tied up in a psychopath's basement, of what I would, in a lucid state, think an eighteen-year-old Leah would look like...

Perhaps I'm expressing myself clumsily.

It's one of the Russian poets who said this: Dreams ensoul lost love, for the fleeting lifespan of a flower.

> You know, Natasha. I was just thinking—this may sound strange—but you were my mother's conscience. I don't mean my mother felt guilty about you—that you were an immigrant, or underpaid (right?), or the whole women-riding-on-other-women's backs theory. I mean that she couldn't do two things at once, so she split the one thing off for you (me), and along with it, her conscience.
>
> Well no, she didn't turn evil or something when you left us. She was bereaved. I guess you should know that.
>
> She's more or less famous now, as in people recognize her in restaurants. She still won't take my old bedroom.
>
> Apropos of nothing, I'm going to Italy with one of my professors and her family for the summer. My mother is really upset about it. She wanted us to hang out on the scenic Hudson for August. I almost couldn't decide between Tuscany and Eleventh Avenue. My professor—sculpture—has two little boys, Roman and Felix. So I'm their nanny. Any advice for me, Natasha?

How I wished she'd sent a picture. Although her black-and-white photographs of local Vermonters seemed to me perfectly proficient, I wanted to see Leah. Regardless of my dream, at eighteen she must be tall and skinny like her mother, veering around somewhat absent-mindedly, peaked skull, marrow-colored hair, an adolescent crone with arms all wrist, legs all ankle. I admit, I can't imagine her beautiful. I always thought she was rather too shy to be a body. She used to have to hike up her saggy underpants. It galled me, the way it was constant, and that Ivy wouldn't go out and buy her fresh white ones, with new elastic. Was that what Leah meant by her mother's conscience?

All afternoon I anticipated writing, and my little boys, Jack and Colin, were revivified by my anticipation. They sat at their little red table clubbing their pale chunks of dinner and I was overcome with tenderness. Colin, the little one, called me Nata. His father joked, *Nada*? I even laughed along with them.

And suddenly it seemed to me that all my past successes as a nanny were thrown into relief, even exaggerated in the light of my new status. Leah had found me, and my good fortune seemed to radiate out so that any number of other human beings in the world were now also assured their reunions.

I was so eager to write that I skipped drying the pans after dinner (wondering how I ever have the patience to do it?) and went straight to the attic.

It so happens that I am also taking care of two boys, I started. What are the ages of Roman and Felix? Mine are one and three, too young to travel to Italy!

I stopped. I looked around my attic room as if I hoped to describe it. For Leah's sake, was it a Grimm's fairy tale garret? The view over the street trees... I suddenly remembered the ring of lamplight on Leah's squirrel-gray pate, the crown of a gentle princess.

The single bed was too soft, a Goldilocks hammock. The walls were steep, and ran right into the ceiling.

The little boys here are very good, I began again, although now it was some time later.

In the Soviet Union I might have become a prominent psychologist.

I wrote, My present family is very demanding.

Then I stopped for such a long time that I lost my train of thought, my intent, entirely.

Several days passed, although I was composing all the while. I almost felt like my own biographer. I wasn't so foolish as to flatter myself it was for my sake Leah found me, but even more, then, I felt a considerable pressure.

Once, I started: The little boys here have plenty of spirit!

In fact, these are my first children who receive medication.

Or better this way?: The little boys I take care of now can be very difficult.

No. She'll think I have allegiances, favorites, and she'll wonder how she stacks up against them.

Are you planning to major in sculpture?

All the children I've ever cared for are good children, Leah.

I laughed at myself harshly. Sometimes I dream they've been snatched—from the park, from the market, it's like a parallel life,

really, the fear of it—and then I realize, in the dream, that it is I myself who have vanished.

Dear Natasha,

If you sent me a letter at school, I missed it, so now you'll have to spring for the stamps to Italy. My mother gave me a pack of condoms as a farewell present. Watch out for those Italians. Disturbing? Uh-huh. You know my mother. She's all about fairness to the point of being blind to human nature!

Emmie, my professor, says times zones are cathartic. We hope for rebirth when we travel. My God, we run ourselves straight into the knives of jet lag, whispers Emmie at take-off.

It's probably obvious I have a crush on her. Ah! Not just her art but her whole life is talented. Her husband. And her children. Roman is three and Felix is one. Any tricks of the trade for me?

I have never allowed the maudlin aspect, but suddenly I remembered Leah's little sack of bones on my lap, her cinder hair beneath my nose, the Murphy bed latched high up on the wall above us.

Emmie hasn't bought a seat for Felix, so he's tethered to me by an orange seatbelt looped to my seatbelt. Roman effortlessly unclicks his life or death and stands up to regard the folks in the row in back of us. I peek through the seat crack to see if the trio of passengers is receptive. A nine-year-old boy (I'm guessing) encased in electronics is flashing and flinching on some other planet. His mother has newly plucked eyebrows. She might have done it with unsterilized tweezers. She clings to her paperback like it's one of the seat cushions that doubles as a life raft. She does a tiny wave at Roman and then closes her eyes against a deathshead. The third passenger is a business droid with newspaper-colored complexion and goggly eyes like a housefly under a microscope. He says, Do you like flying? Roman falls down as if he's been shot. Are these flying types really ubiquitous or is it my own perception that lacks variety? Sometimes I really just hate growing up. Not just, oh, things used to be so simple, but things used to be so original. Now, everything, absolutely everything, is a repeat.

Which is why I find myself in Italy, and not on the banks of the Hudson River.

Rolls of gold straw, stubbly fields, combed and tufted pine trees line dirt roads off the highway. I look over and Emmie is closing her eyes at the wheel of the car we rented. The boys are bobbleheads in their carseats. For a long moment I think we will just lift off into the shiny sky which I've already decided is the essence of Italy. Then I realize that we are slowing down rather quickly and veering off the road rather dangerously.

I am too shy to wake up my professor! I put my hands on the wheel where they won't touch her hands. I don't even know how to drive in America, let alone Italy. I let the car swerve off the highway and roll into a ditch gently. Then I don't know what to do so I turn the keys out of the ignition. I tell myself the car can't spring forward with the keys severed.

How's that for my first adventure?

Oh, that's very fine for an adventure, Leah. I don't know how to drive, either. Perhaps you remember the way I scuttled you across the streets in a state of clinical panic. I don't trust drivers. I close my eyes against them, my breathing choked, irregular, not trusting death, either.

When we get to the compound (Emmie wakes up in the ditch and looks at me strangely. My mouth corkscrews instead of smiles), we are delirious. Felix begins vomiting. I stand back—surely this is Emmie's department. Indeed, Emmie grabs my arm and says, Oh my God, I throw up when I see throw up. She turns away and hurls.

Did I mention that we're joining Emmie's two best friends from college? They've each brought their nanny. There's one nanny, hanging out a fan of laundry. The other is a button-nosed eunuch (I decide, cruelly) from Thailand (Emmie's friend Hedwig tells me). She turns the hose on the vomit in the courtyard before she's even said hello to us.

Hedwig, later: You're Emmie's student?

I wilt like a zucchini flower on the end of its phallus.

The laundry-fan nanny is French. Now she's sweeping the patio and when she speaks her voice has the same rasp as the broom on the flagstones. Her name is Eveline. She looks like a

black cat—the kind that crosses the street in front of you—black coat shiny from all the baby mice and birds she's been eating.

The first few days we sleep till lunch time in our slightly dank, tiled apartment with no plastic bags for the dirty diapers. This is my fault, as I am the nanny. My shampoo has exploded in the jet's belly, but so far I am too shy to ask Emmie about hers—she hasn't put it out yet. Natasha, did I ask you if you've ever been to Italy? Do you know what's weird? Is this possible? I had a memory yesterday that I've never had before.

I always used to ask my mother why you didn't have children, Natasha. I think—excuse me if this sounds, I don't know, capitalist—I wanted to know if *I* was doing you a favor by being your child-figure, or if *you* were doing me a favor by being my keeper-figure. And my mother used to say Leah! Don't you ever, ever. There could be ghosts of abortions, adoptions in chinzy nightgowns, not to mention drownings in the bathtub.

Of course she didn't say all that, but I got the gist of it. Do you remember this expression, peculiar to my mother? The minute you assume, you get caught out in the rain. Did I tell you that she still won't assume my bedroom?

But here's what I remembered, yesterday. Soon after you left us, I heard my mother telling someone that she felt there was an element of flight to your departure.

Well, is it true? Were you on the lam or something?

Certainly I was glad Virginia didn't choose this moment to quake up the attic stairs with some scheduling conflict. I've always thought laughing was worse than crying because laughing, you have to pretend to be happy.

I made my decision it was not appropriate to write back to Leah. There were a multitude of reasons. I was paid by the hour and I owed it to myself to remain utterly free of children in my unpaid hours. There was never any *joy* for me, with children. Indeed, sleepless nights worrying over Leah left me distracted, even depressed with Jack and Colin.

And yet when I received another letter...

You should see the clear-skinned, glinty-eyed women, Natasha. And the dark gangly men with lovers' names; I get why my mother provided me with condoms.

We are invited to a dinner at midnight (I exaggerate the time but not the magic) and climb steep stairs, me carrying Felix, Emmie tugging Roman, to a sprawling red-tiled terrace furnished with monumental potted olives. Two cooks, three courses, faucets of wine in square juice glasses. All candlelight. Then Francesca, the hostess, a tycoon's daughter, spies our children.

The little ones aren't tired?

Emmie swoons into the lovely commotion even as her children are dismissed from the party. Crestfallen, I pull them inside the "apartment."

But the sun is healthy, the Italian language is organic, the cheese tastes like meat, and the milk tastes like flowers! Smooth brown haunches in tiny swim suits. I look down at my tissue-paper skin, grayish white, tattooed with the soot of NY City. Perhaps having inferior skin consistency makes me try harder at conversation.

Those other trees on the terrace are hazelnuts!

I told myself that Leah's letters were poetic, but not personal. I told myself that I was never more than a stand-in, a warm body, for any of my children, and so was not, categorically, entitled to any sense of guilt I might feel at not writing Leah.

Emmie spends the mornings in a studio she rented. She comes back to the compound for lunch, upsets Roman and Felix with her managing of their diets, and then calculates—as if, every time, it's a special exception—if I could put the boys down while she takes a breather, a-k-a four hours. After siesta, she runs three miles with Hedwig to a polo field where they nuzzle the horses like infatuated school girls. Then they walk back, all art and relationships.

Here's how it started. Last semester I had an idea for a life-sized sculpture of a woman. The whole point was she would be clothed, suggesting the opposite of clothing. Like naked bodies are less sexy, actually, than bodies in bathing suits. Uh-huh, that's

my college for you. A clothed sculpture about nakedness, basically. Emmie was the one who drew me out, encouraged me. I told her about you, I admit, and I probably made you out to be some hammer-fisted, kerchiefed, Stakhanovite. Emmie said my idea was very precocious. Then I had an idea that the body had to be yours, actually—I mean I became obsessed with likeness and proportion and even your particular wardrobe. I remembered—and it startled me—that you always looked as if you'd just stepped out of the collective closet of the Soviet Union. You looked as if you immigrated every day, to Chelsea.

(Not that my mother's wardrobe was ever up-to-date, but did she ever even offer to walk you down Hudson to the church thrift shop?)

Emmie argued that the power of the work was that it was universal, you know Woman's lot and all that. I disagreed but didn't know how to express myself. I just felt like it was mine. Even though it was yours, in a way, Natasha. Emmie said I didn't understand art and I broke down in tears, knowing girlish capitulation was the only thing that would save the relationship. And here's where the relationship has gotten me.

I was holding Felix on my hip yesterday—he's the quiet one, with the gourd-like forehead. Roman hurled himself at me, across the lawn—his love is so boisterous. All of a sudden I remembered how I could disarm you by running into your arms—because you were so shy, for a grownup, and going for a hug was so unlike me.

I found myself wishing she'd return to the nanny on the lam, me, Natasha. I longed to laugh again imagining myself ducking some black market thugs, gumshoes wearing masks of Beria and Stalin. Admittedly, there was a hole in the logic of such letters—why did Leah write me? But I couldn't pretend I wasn't exalted. Emotions that would be embarrassingly simple in my psychology days, but now.... Well, I told myself, there was the possibility that I was a lonely old woman.

I came to New York at twenty-six and married the first man I met, literally and proverbially. He stuck his head around the fire escape. "Hey," he said. "Neighbor."

He had a loopy charming grin and hard eyes the color of lapis. I had just brought home a pot of daisies (*margaritka*, in Russian), and I was setting them out on the little balcony. I wouldn't have called it a fire escape. My English was good, but not specific. He climbed over, still grinning, as if he were shy of my beauty but like a dog, couldn't help himself. He had long legs in tight jeans and white socks with holes in them. So already we were intimate. We had one son, Arturo, named after my husband's father, the patriarch. The family business was Italian tiles. We were a mismatch from the beginning, although there were never any light-hearted fairies making fun of us.

It didn't take more than ten minutes for me to look through my papers for a picture of Leah. With the way I move around so much I don't have much of anything. No. In those days before digital cameras and e-mail snapshots, it seemed more exaggerated, deliberate to take a picture. I wouldn't have wanted Ivy to get the wrong idea. As I said before, there was already some sense, among my previous families, that I could be too vigilant.

Leah's was one of only two families I didn't live with. The other family, in fact, I had started out living with, but the mother, a rubbery-faced woman who had a great deal subtracted from natural beauty, felt that I was "overbearing in the household." I pointed out to her (I had nowhere else to live, but she didn't know that) that most accidents happen in the presence of many adults because each individual adult assumes another is watching the children. Of course, a child can wander to the brink of an unattended swimming pool, I said, mistake the deep for the shallow, but more likely, it is when many mothers in oversized fashionable sunglasses like wasps at the nectar of gossip are present that a drowning actually happens.

The rubbery mother had fallen completely silent.

"Oh my, Natasha," she said several long seconds after I had finished. All of her lipstick had come off on her coffee cup and she looked both pale and lurid.

It occurred to me she thought I was accusing her of the—well, the pre-death—of one of her children.

"I am sorry, Becky," I said somewhat woodenly.

"It's stressful being with children, Natasha," she managed.

My opinion was that for her, it was, indeed, terribly "stressful."

"I think you should come in the mornings, you know, in the breakfast rush-hour—" Half smiling she indicated the war zone of toast and yogurt and mashed banana for the baby. "And then," (she continued), "well, *leave* after the baby's dinner."

I bowed my head until she said, "Natasha?"

"Becky, it's as you wish," I said. "Now please allow me—" and I moved in on the crumbly carnage, and the baby, who had been watching alarmedly, began banging with her bottle.

I came commuting in to Manhattan every morning by seven o'clock to get Leah to school by nine. Sometimes I volunteered in Leah's classroom, divvying paint or helping at the scissors station. I used to stay there, in "Chelsea," with Leah, until ten or eleven in the evening. A few times Ivy gave me cab fare but—I'm astonished at myself!—I categorically refused it.

Once, only a little bit less than a year after I'd left Leah, I had an opportunity to walk slowly past the front of her school at the dismissal hour. Many of the children who indiscriminately bumped and jostled one another were as tall as I was. I couldn't believe that had been the case when I used to pick up Leah. I felt a terrible clutching and sourness in my stomach: in anticipation of this very moment, I realized, I hadn't eaten anything since I'd left Nyack at six o'clock that morning. Suddenly I knew I was not in the right frame of mind to greet Leah. In any case I had no right to see her, none at all, it would be a compromise of context; like time travel, it was simply not possible.

I almost threw the next letter away as soon as I received it. I had intercepted it in the entrance hallway—Virginia need not creep up to the attic again, justified on her errand—and I stood beneath the chandelier that Jack had many times tried to jump for, holding the letter away from my body. I could see myself from above, too: I was very stilted and ridiculous in this action.

Such a correspondence need not continue, I heard myself whisper, as if I were, indeed, acting. I had a moment to myself—the boys were napping.

But what if I, Natasha, *weren't* just an adolescent idea for a clothed, female figure? What if such a statue . . . took on a life of its own, like

a guardian angel? I wouldn't write back, that remained clear to me, but I must remain, somehow, *open*.

Dear Natasha,

Emmie's other college roommate, Lorene, hired a real Italian grandmother to cook ragu that smells like it has a hundred ingredients. The sauce simmers, thickens, reduces, and the grandmother-cook sweeps the patio with one hand and picks herbs in terra cotta with the other. Emmie's all about: Don't come near me, I am a ladysculptor. Molly and Eveline have urged me to let the boys watch TV with their boys. Do you know what? All the children are boys, future kings and princes, and all the grownups are women. I'm the only woman with any future to speak of.

Lorene, actually, has just returned from a week of Ashtanga in the center of Italy. Emmie keeps teasing her about being strong and centered— obviously, Emmie wishes she were a svelte yogini. Lorene and Hedwig think it's very cute that I'm the nanny. They tease Emmie that she must really trust Mark, Emmie's husband. They tease Emmie that their nannies have to pick up the slack, like making the kids the lunchtime chopped ham and ketchuppy hotdogs.

A rash and fever called sestina afflicts our Felix. The poetry of it! cries Emmie. Only in Italy!

I guess that's where we are: the space between the verses.

Now it all makes sense. How he threw up upon our arrival, how he's been so clingy, not his usual self, Emmie assures me. Hedwig is a biologist. She calls sestina one of the last remaining childhood illnesses. As if the illness itself were an endangered species! Free to burn, perhaps to purify, intones Hedwig. It occurs to me to ask Hedwig how she feels about death.

Lorene is a fashion designer in Paris. She says, So did we approve of the spaghetti sauce? We did, didn't we. She has a way of pulling her ribs up off her stomach, as if to make more room for spaghetti. Hedwig comes in from wherever she has been with her laptop, wearing a bikini and the gauzy Indian tunic that all the ladies are wearing—really, another kind of housedress. Emmie hands me the sestina.

> Mark's arrival. The big personality. Everyone feels loved and it's all worthwhile to be stranded in Italy. Yes, they're already starting to complain about their vacation. Maybe we shouldn't have listened to Francesca, maybe this isn't the best spot. Maybe this is second-tier, maybe we're missing the part where it's going to show up in a glossy mag, state-side. Mark heads down to the beach hours after everyone else has already departed. I know because I must stay in the tiled quarters with maladious Felix.
>
> I'm not really sure if I should talk to him. Only it makes me think of so many things to say when I don't talk to him. Last night I was so bottled up that I ended up telling Hedwig about you, Natasha, how you flashed in my mind every day after school, after you left us, and how I'd have to catch myself before running out to meet you.

All right, I'm beginning to recognize something of myself in Leah. I see how she's making friends with those women, her professor and her professor's girlfriends, by confession. She's baring her wounds as a way to be accepted. Sure, she tells them about her daddy, how he left them for another woman; she tells them about her Russian nanny, who left them for a family in Nyack.

Yes, there was a time when my "opening line," as they say, had something to do with losing Arturo. I didn't think I could get a job without it. A mother would show me around her big sunny apartment, and I'd kneel down and greet her children, and then the mother would have to throw in some extra, like a dog who had allergies and had to be fed cooked turkey. Well then I would make my confession. I thought of it as a special coin. If one side is pain the other must be friendship.

I go around all day worrying about Leah. The other husbands have arrived too, and Leah calls them bigshots, and now she calls the women longlegs. She writes,

> They've all gone down to the salty still water. They're all parading along the eucalyptus avenue toward the umbrella colony. If I close my eyes I can hear the sound of scuttling maids coming out from the corners, taking back the house, the loud brusque whisper that can only be the sound of sweeping. Your maid is like your

garlic breath. Molly, the Thai nanny, and Eveline share a closet with bunk beds. Molly puts rice in the mouths of seven siblings in Thailand. I don't know this for a fact but I sure can hear my mother say it. All Eveline will tell me about herself is that she hates the food in Italy.

Have you ever been to Italy? I can't believe I forgot to ask you.

One of Francesca's friends (Francesca, sorry: one of Mark's old girlfriends, how we heard about these apartments) arrives from Rome to stay in the apartment upstairs from us. Her name is Giulietta, which is a whole different kettle of fish from Julie, isn't it. Despite her name, she's all bourgeoisie and gristle. She wears a big floppy sun hat and movie star glasses. She brings her terrible son Brando and an American au pair from Vassar College. Why does the au pair seem more like a house guest? Because she has some feminist theory 101 in her back pocket? Last night we were hanging out on our dark lawn—Roman was waiting to catch a bat or at least hit one with the sand shovel he was waving—when a chair came hurtling through the air from the terrace above us. Brando was having a tantrum.

Mark came out of the tiled quarters. Everyone looked to him to see what was called for.

Vassar slunk down, whining, But why don't they have shower curtains in Italy?

You lost a chair, said Mark, deadpan.

There's a little cut-out in the pine trees through which I could see the twinkling lights from boats on the water.

Al-lie? called Giulietta from the terrace above us.

Vassar shivered.

Mark laughed at her and she flickered up for attention. He said, You must be Allie. He reached out his hand for an introduction.

He said, Baths in the sea, Allie.

I happen to know he's forty. He swings his hips when he walks, which might be embarrassing in a younger man but it makes him seem youthful.

My employer, Virginia, asks me, "Who are all the letters from, Natasha?"

"I never even asked you," she cocks her head, fleetingly curious, "do you still have family in Russia?"

I look down at the letter in my hand, with its *Italian* stamp and *Italian* postmark. But my employer is not really a classy person. She works hard, she's a doctor, but she started medical school when she was about fifteen (this is her joke, actually), and hasn't seen the real world since then.

I am no longer in the habit of confessing anything. Oh, I'm friendly, and at once gentle and vigilant with the children. I'm always getting told by the mothers that I'm not like the stereotypical Russian nannies with spare-the-rod-spoil-the-child ideas about discipline. It's funny because that phrase of course comes from the Bible, and wouldn't be known to most Soviet Russians of my generation. Also, Russian mamas notoriously spoil their children. As if they had multiples, which they don't, categorically.

I just stand in the hallway not knowing what to say to her. Which is the lesser of two evils? That I'm corresponding with one of my old children (like an affair, almost!), or that I do have family in Russia, with whom I have never, since I emigrated, exchanged so much as a sentence?

Of course, I am not, technically, corresponding.

Luckily my employer doesn't have the time to pursue it. She is already explaining to me some glitch in her schedule, some scheduling conflict, that is a favorite term with her, that overlaps with my afternoon off.... All I can think as she's talking is something from her boys' swim lessons, to which I accompany them, which strikes me as very funny indeed, "bubble bubble breath," which is Virginia talking.

> It's all about the women, here, Natasha. The men are spoiled and paunchy, spreading out in the vacated cities, sleeping late, earning money to pay the nannies. There was one flash-bulb of awareness when they were teenagers, and the rest of their lives they try to get back to it. Their bodies were strong, a sheer drop. Their hair was black, they drank black coffee and liquor indiscriminately. The only consolation now is to make mad money. Yes, Mark has

gone back to New York for a week in the middle of his vacation to make money.

And no, Mark isn't paunchy. He's spoiled; but he's the only one who really pays me any notice. He watches me with Roman and Felix. I figure he'd say something if he didn't like the way I was treating his heirs. They really look like him rather than Emmie. Mark says that one way to travel is to love everything, revere it. I tell him I think the sunbathers on the rocks look like browning dumplings. I tell him I love to watch the family picnics beneath the pine trees. He smiles as if I've just said something very esoteric and he alone understands it.

I don't think she can see it coming. I don't think she's old enough, or pretty enough, to see it coming.

And if I wrote her?

I laugh at myself harshly. I'd disappoint her with my old woman's voice, I'd hurt her with my lack of belief in her beauty.

This Mark, her professor's husband, will come back from his business having justified it to himself—every man can justify it—and Leah will be a bird in the hand before she's even sighted properly in the binoculars.

I take my afternoon off in Central Park. The commuter rail is empty at one o'clock on a Wednesday, and so I have the sense of swooping silently upon the city. I take a little picnic, and Leah's most recent letter. After I finish eating, I wander around for a bit until I find a nice shady rock to sit on—private but not too private—and listen to the xylophone of bird voices. When I close my eyes for a moment, they seem to be elongated, like raindrops, and when a gust of wind comes up, there is a sudden discordance as if the notes are all struck together.

Dear Natasha,

I'm on the lawn again, looking through the keyhole of hedges to the marine blue (today) Mediterranean. Felix is sleeping. Roman is watching the idiot box with Lorene's kids; Hedwig's husband has actually taken his boys out fishing. So that he won't have to do another thing with them all of August. Everyone else (if I say "the others" it will really sound like a novel, won't it) is

out on the count's sailboat. Breezing along the Mediterranean in their sexy skins beneath their sexy sail. Molly and Eveline went into the town—I offered to watch Eveline's charges. I could have taken Felix in his carriage. To town. But I thought I might get points from Emmie for reaching out to Eveline. Ah! I feel like the Christian fundamentalist in an apron and a bonnet making quilts past the year 2000. Life is a sacrifice of the soul, children are the refining fire. Mark said that, with a half smile.

I really can't say you shouldn't have left, Natasha, because that's worse than underpaying, or paying for a single doctor's visit instead of Health Insurance—you can be sure my mother's all over labor violations. I can't say you shouldn't have left, because it sounds controlling. But when is love not controlling?

Here comes Mark. Ah! It seems like he's smiling in spite of himself, you know? Like he genuinely likes me.

Yes, I've been to Italy. My husband took me, and Arturo, when Arturo was a ten-month-old baby. There was a great hassle about my passport. I had been planning never, ever to leave America. That was my thinking. But with the problems at the consulate, my husband began to suspect me of a covert Russianness.

"One thing," he said. "If you're my wife, you don't draw this kind of attention."

We fought all the way to John F. Kennedy Airport. Arturo wailed in the back seat and I twisted around to look in his wobbly eyes. I reached my hand back to his soft knee and he hiccupped. I looked in his wet light eyes and thought to myself that there was no reason under the sun, as they say, why he should stop crying. I knew that things were never going to be good between me and his father. Indeed, Arturo began to wail with renewed passion.

"Oh you're a good mother!" my husband shouted.

I was always the crazy one, as if it had to be one of us. My husband said he should have seen it. He claimed that I mumbled certain things in my sleep.

Indeed, whenever we fought, my English failed me, as did the entire body of my psychologist's training. This fight was something to do with the way I'd left the apartment. I hadn't tidied up sufficiently. I hadn't put away the clean dishes from the previous night's

dinner, for example. My husband was suspicious of everyone and everything, and he somehow thought the likelihood of our apartment being broken into—by the police, that is—was greater because I'd left it in shambles. I knew a little bit about the drugs, but I never said anything.

Arturo was just beginning to walk at the time of the trip to Italy. My husband was very proud of him. My husband wanted to take him out and show him on the streets, in the bars and restaurants, as a son of Italy. We visited various cousins of my husband, and my husband always pulled Arturo away from me and presented him as if he belonged solely to my husband.

The last three days of our vacation we spent on the Mediterranean. It reminded me of the Black Sea, where I'd been as a child: so calm, like a bathtub, families like porpoises picnicking on the rocks, riding bicycles down piney paths, eating late and lavishly. We went to the shale beach in the afternoons, and my husband would swim out to the boats while Arturo clapped and paddled in the shallow water.

Our last afternoon there was a terrific thunderstorm. As I remember, there was an ominous warning rustle through the pines and in a matter of seconds the sky was cracking like ice on a river in springtime and the air was throwing off shards of electricity. I could see my husband's slick black head dipping way out in the water and I began waving frantically. Then the sky dumped out its buckets.

What should I do? I tried to shield Arturo, but I had nothing on but a bathing suit. I'd left our clothes and towels at the hotel, in the midst of another fight with my husband. The rain was surprisingly cold, and hard, like one of those "massaging" shower heads. Arturo began to whimper.

Just then, a teenage boy appeared at my elbow. How can I describe it? He was like a courtier in a castle, he had that air of grave attendance. His hair was jet and he had a low forehead and fluted nostrils. His gaze was intent, as if *I* were the sole reason for this moment. His tanned body in a swimsuit was strangely flat, almost one-dimensional. He held out his big towel. I nodded gratefully and wrapped up Arturo. My baby's slightly droopy eyes, one was what they call "lazy," his copper hair like mine in a delicate ridge over the crest of his head, (now darkened with water), his soft bare body...

"I am Seryozha," the teenage boy bowed to Arturo. Arturo smiled from beneath the towel.

"Come on!" He gestured for us to follow. He pointed to a big pine on the beach of which one half was charcoaled, branded by lightning. "That was last summer," said Seryozha, by way of a warning.

He herded us along the path. Lucky it was wide, because you could hardly see past the curtain of rain in front of you, and I was sure I would have stumbled with Arturo. When we got to the little hotel where we were staying, I held Arturo away from me to unwrap the towel and return it. Seryozha shook his head vigorously. "Tomorrow."

This seemed at the time the kindest thing that anyone had ever offered. He bowed again, and disappeared into the rainstorm.

I'm sorry, Natasha. This has nothing to do with you, really, I mean you shouldn't be concerned for me like my mother.

Maybe you're my conscience, actually. Did you get the letter where I said you were my mother's? I admit I was kind of proud of myself for figuring out that little piece of psychology.

I admit it's kind of funny to keep writing to someone who doesn't write back to you, but in a way it reminds me of some art project sanctioned at my college. Anyway, feel free to destroy these letters. I certainly never want to see them.

Last night we went to a medieval town about an hour's drive from here for a late dinner. Francesca had recommended the restaurant, with outdoor, torch-lit tables in a cobblestone chasm walled by stone churches. Emmie and Mark had a bad "row," as Hedwig calls it, beforehand, so Emmie stayed behind with Felix. Mark wanted to take Roman. Hedwig and Lorene urged me to come along in order to help Mark with Roman. I would have stayed home out of loyalty to Emmie, I know I would have. Ah! Could you see this coming? Please tell me you couldn't. Have you ever felt like all that was surreal in the night is a curse in the morning?

It was in the car on the way home. We took a different car from Lorene and Hedwig & Co. because of Roman's carseat. It was with our clothes on. I kept thinking of that diamond-shaped view of the ocean through the hedges, and our keyhole of nakedness. I said, Please don't tell Emmie. And Mark laughed, Emmie and I

> tell each other everything! The kind of slippery teasing that writes a reprieve for everything. That covers all its bases. Do you know what I mean? I know my mother would say that's not teasing, Leah, that's an abuse of power. Can you just hear her?

My husband roared at me, "You left me in a thunderstorm!" Oh, I needed to laugh. What a baby my husband sounded like. What a stupid baby. It came to me that I would not tell him about Seryozha—whose name couldn't, I realized, possibly have been Russian.

I suppose it was in that moment that I knew I was leaving.

Here is the truth, Leah. I would be the crazy one if crazy was what it took to get free.

I told myself that I did not want to "go down" with my husband, certainly that was his slang, and again I needed to laugh at the evocation. For example I had not the least intention of being at home when the police arrived heaving with petty resentment at having to climb four stories. Ours was a walk-up, just like yours, Leah. I would not pretend I wasn't terrified of those black-nosed German shepherds, police dogs with thick muscular tails used, like kangaroos, for superior balance.

"Where was I supposed to have thought you'd gone, Natalie, Moscow?" my husband shouted.

Yes, I called myself Natalie then. Assimilation. I thought it sounded odd, harsh, nonsense, but that's what I thought a professional immigrant would do. Not a housecleaner or a nanny.

When I take too many painkillers now there's a side effect of my uterus contracting, and I think, mincing down the stairs to Virginia's children from my attic, that children are truly our penance for being, once, ourselves, children. But then I think, why should you, Leah, have to pay for being Leah?

The storm cleared and my husband said he would take Arturo to the town center where there was an arcade with many small shops, cafes, and a fruit market. They would spend the afternoon making friends with the shopkeepers. Fine, I said. Goodbye, Arturo. I had to kiss him in my husband's arms although I did not want to go near my husband.

I allowed one moment of silence in our little hotel room.

When I think about my son now, it's not the way I knew him, held him, and held on to him when he was a baby. I try to imagine him as a grown man, that he's tall and kind and handsome, that he's been a good son to his father and his stepmother, that he's gone into the tile business or gone to college, that he says with curious pride he's half Russian. Even if he doesn't, that maybe he thinks it's his secret.

I must add that as far as I know he has never tried to find me.

No, I never allow myself to think of him like that—in my arms, on the beach of the Mediterranean, in a wild thunderstorm. Because in that moment, I was sure Seryozha (and I know I didn't hear Sergio) was our guardian angel. I was sure he was a sign. That this was the beginning. The cleansing rain, the hotel room with its welcome, stuffy warmth, Arturo's eyes gleaming with excitement from our rescue.