

STEPHEN SPICEHANDLER

To Calvary

This toy train Bronx, this serenity in miniature stretching out to all the bridges over the Long Island Sound, this small town Americana miraculously placed in America's most notorious urban borough, this is the view that is spread across Room 1014's glass panorama facing east. I can see the tiny 6 train rumbling and screeching above the tree levels, above the small brick homes, and I can see the ladybug cars vrooming up and down the Hutch and I-95 (and I can envy them all), but all I can hear are the intercoms and IV beeps of the Gynecological Oncology wing at Albert Einstein Medical Center, the brisk voices of the medical staff going about their business and the hushed tones of the ailing and their loved ones.

I am beside my "baby," the roller-coaster love of my life, the Genghis Khan of beauty, now bald and fat and drugged up the kazoo, attached like a medical experiment to machines and tubes, big enough to float but sinking in gray slumber instead. My China doll by way of Marco Polo is fading from me, what with losing the function of one organ then the other (chemo be damned), and her brazen silk personality is more like faded flannel now, still lovely to have in your arms, but worn and needing to be tucked in of a night.

I am struck by the mercilessness with which she has been stricken. Her skull's nakedness speaks of atrocity, the white skin through the occasional black stubble of her need to be protected. Help me, she had cried (in effect) over the phone, the first time her hair fell out three years ago, after taking a shower. Her sobs were the visceral reaction to the blow she knew was coming. A year and a half later, when her reprieve had been withdrawn and her body was once again a battlefield of poisons, the tears were a gentle echo of the first time. This third submission to the toxic cure was more matter-of-fact. She started pulling her roots out as soon as she saw the stray clump; it was just another part of grooming. "Help me," she had asked sweetly, and how could I refuse, who had been spared such ravages. She had told me it would be simple, easy pulling, and it was. There was no resistance at all. Longer lengths of hair than had been visible slowly slid out of her skull and, like rabbits out of a

hat, I was baffled by the logistics of it all. Baffled and a little nauseated: my conception of the human condition was shaken and I did not want her to see that in my eyes.

Now I watch her unobserved. She is white and massive from fluid build-up, her delicate skin transparent with patches of green and pink and the yellow of medical swabs. She is struggling in another world, her lips pursed, her eyelids flickering; she is diminished and far away, no matter how large, how close. I wait patiently for the chance to catch her pitch-black eyes shining out at me the way they have for almost twenty-two years, envoys of brio to beckon through the fog.

And then slowly, her consciousness rising in glimmers, she floats to the surface. Her eyes are half-open, they do not shine, but she is here with me and we are together.

"You're back," she whispers, then closes her eyes once more. Then, almost as an after-thought, she returns to me. "Where have you been all this time?"

I tell her about the traffic on I-95, about the parking space at the furthest end of the hospital's lot, but those are not answers to her concerns.

"You've been gone for days!" she accuses. *Why did you abandon me, I hear. You've left me at the mercy of strangers when it's you I need.*

Of course I've only been gone overnight. I've been running home each night to our bed and preparing each morning for the new day, husbanding my resources, taking my small comforts so that I can be tireless and as generous to her as I can when we're together. But that is not Jane's understanding.

"We didn't know where you were. I thought you'd left me."

I will never leave her. I open her small closed palm and hold it in my grasp. "I just went home for the night. You knew that. And I'm back. I'll be here all day." I'm glad she's awake and I can stroke the side of her face, be in contact. "Marcie knew where I was."

"No," says Jane, softer under my touch, "she didn't know." And then she purrs noiselessly, her eyes slit and relaxed, letting my fingers soothe her. She can be soothed by Marcie and Jackie and Sandi, by my crew of our friends and volunteers, but I am the rock in her life and she is the ocean in mine. We have become each other's world, even when apart, but Jane's experience of things has become

chaotic while mine has maintained its steady downward flow. I arrange, I take care, I coordinate. She struggles, she grasps.

Her eyes are warm and direct. "You were bad," she teases. We've graduated to flirtation, which gives us both a rush. "I have so much to tell you," she says, even though I saw her twelve hours ago. "I have so much...strange things..." and then she lets loose her grasp, she submerges right below the surface, a wave bathing her in a momentary drug-like repose. I have her, I lose her, I have her, I lose her. I am patient. I am here to be by her side as she rises and falls above and below the ocean's surface. It is my form of meditation. She still has her smile *so glad to see ya* and her hand is still in mine. *I'll be with you in a minute*. Take your time, I'm thinking. Take what you need. I'm here so she can wake or sleep peacefully. I wipe out all other stimuli so that I can be her photographic receptor, second by second: every hair follicle, every skin cell, every pretty breath, every silence fleeing her slightly parted lips is recorded.

And then, like that, her eyes are open and they light up the room. They can darken the room, too, I know, if they want to. But she has taken only a short commercial interruption and is ready to resume her joy at my being here.

"You look tired, baby," she says, gently pulling me to sit by her side. "I worry about you. Who's taking care of you?"

"You are," I reply. "I know your tricks. Somehow you are taking care of me from your hospital bed. Aren't you?"

She smiles. "I'm not telling. You're not getting enough sleep." She brushes hair away from my forehead. "As soon as we get home, I'm going to take care of you."

"We'll take care of each other."

But that's not what she wants to hear. I've bankrupted her momentary fantasy that she no longer needs being taken care of. She looks aggrieved.

"When are we going home, Ed? Are you taking me home today?"

A long catheter tube arises from bandages on the right side of her back and slithers its way to the left side of the hospital bed where it is tied to the white railing near her feet. The catheter bag is one-third full and imperceptibly keeps filling. A second tumor has strangled her one remaining ureter after her first tumor put a vise around her stomach. Any eating and eliminating is now through

plastic, but we are waiting for the surgeons to install a shunt so that Jane will no longer need this twentieth-century tail.

So no, not today. She won't be coming home today. I reacquaint her with the tubing, holding it up for her inspection so we can laugh about her lapse of memory and distract ourselves from her anxiety over when—and how—this latest hurdle will be resolved. She holds the clear plastic in her hand to assure herself of its physicality, and then she tucks it neatly along the edge of the bed, the better to keep her territory orderly and under control, to smooth out the corners of her emotional turmoil.

"I don't want to be here anymore," she says. "Dr. Koenig isn't talking to me. I don't know what's going on, but something is. Why won't he talk to me? We need to talk about what's happening to me. Maybe you can make him come here."

"He's out sick, honey. Remember?"

"No he's not. I see him all the time. He's avoiding me. Go look in the conference room. Maybe you can find him. Tell him I need to speak to him now."

I'm encouraged that she's pumping out orders like a busy general in charge. I like that she still feels in command of things. She sits looking out over her imaginary kingdom and I, her courtier, her adjutant, inform her of conditions in the field.

"Dr. Koenig even had to cancel surgery. I told you yesterday. He's probably not back yet. As soon as he's back, we'll talk."

"He's avoiding me."

"No. He's not. I promise. I wouldn't lie to you."

Jane takes my hand. Our palms kiss and nestle. Her gaze quietly touches my face.

"There are so many things," she tells me. "So many things to tell you. Strange things."

I wait expectantly. I want to know what is on her mind. Her experiences are not the ones I can share. Cancer is not like living through the sixties, or like being there for your child when he's in crisis, or commiserating over broken dreams or rejoicing over those attained. It pulls her away from me; it takes her somewhere I can't go. From now on, I can only follow like an attendant, waiting to be filled in: pain, no pain, hunger, no hunger, nausea, no nausea, and on and on until we reach the point that we did two weeks before when it was breath, no breath...*Ed, I can't breathe...*The culmina-

tion of three years on this journey. I can follow her gurney from the emergency room to the operating room to her room on the oncology wing, but we are not going together. We are only side by side. This is happening to her; it is only occurring to me.

“I think I want to sit by the window,” Jane says softly, raising her left hand in my direction. We start the complicated operation necessary to maneuver. The bed’s motor propels her to a sitting position, the side railing makes way for her dismount, together we shift her weight so that she sits over the edge of the bed. I hold her bloated calves in my hand as I stretch the hospital slippers over her abused feet; I pull the heavy aquamarine leather chairs over to the bay window and then untangle and gather her train of plastic tubing as I escort her to our impoverished loveseat. This is how you scoop up someone in your arms when they are losing the battle with their bodies: with attention to detail and plenty of patience.

From within our antiseptic cave, we stare in wonder at the view outside. Everything moves, breathes, whistles by with purpose, and watching it is ours. Jane has not been outside now for almost two weeks, and when she was last outside, the exciting tumult of breeze and light and movement was intoxicating and exhausting; she loved it and it frightened her; it took her breath away. She wants to join it, be a part of the tumult: that is her nature. We hold each other’s hand; the hospital is our Ferris wheel, and we let the most mundane of boroughs exhilarate us in its vastness. As the wheel keeps turning, our eyes rest on the building in the foreground of our view. Right across the street, shielded by a large crucifix on its forehead, sits Calvary Hospital, a five-story brick structure which spreads out in two perpendicular wings. Inside it, we know, are the terminally ill, finally succumbing quietly to cancer. It looms below us; it is an anchor in a teeming sea.

“The strangest things go on at Calvary.” Jane leans in for protection, she leans in to confide, she wants to convey her excitement. She’s witnessed revelation. “In the middle of the night, rows of black limousines line up at the entrance. They put these coffins in them when no one can see. Then they drive away. It’s spooky.”

“In hearses?” I falter.

“Yes, people die there all the time. They have to get rid of the bodies. They don’t want people to be upset so they do it when no one would see.”

"Are you sure it's not a dream?" I stroke the back of her hand.
"It wasn't just me! Marcie saw it, too! You'll see, tonight. Every night."

"Jane—"

She pulls back. Her demeanor is icy, sober and acute. "I'm not kidding." She will not be patronized. She will patronize me instead. "How do you *think* an intensive care facility deals with the bodies?"

Why would I ever have thought about this before? I look across at Calvary, all middle-American in the light of the late afternoon, and try to see it as it would appear lit by streetlights, ferrying the dead, practically Venetian. Where do they go? How is the business of death handled? You don't think about the unthinkable. Would they wrap the bodies like loaves of bread to be commercially delivered to the funeral franchises? Or would this be the beginning of their respectful, tradition-bound, pious journey to the burial ground? *Forgive me, Jane, for I know not what is done; I know not what you've seen.*

"It must be upsetting for you to see all this!"

Jane comes back towards my shoulder, as if in relief.

"No, it's not! Really! It's just so interesting! I never knew!"

"And I never thought about it."

"And then, one by one, the hearses drive away. Over to that parking lot where they unload the bodies at the crematorium."

Jane's in my arms. Babble behind us. Quiet before us. Calvary's crucifix has a pinhole glare. I don't know what she's talking about.

"Crematorium?"

"Yes, the crematorium. That big building over there." She's pointing at the bakery for the London Biscuits factory across from Calvary's parking lot, a large yellow industrial cathedral.

"All through the night you can watch the smoke coming out as they burn the bodies."

"Jane, that's a bakery. They bake in the middle of the night. 'London Biscuits'...? 'Melba Toast'...?"

"I know what they're doing there! If it was just a bakery, why would they bring the bodies there? At night it becomes a crematorium! *You* didn't see it. Me and Marcie did. Ask Marcie. Why don't you believe me?"

The thing is, I had believed her. I have always believed her. One more chapter in the epic story of Jane's ability to make reality bend

to her will, and bring along everyone with her by the intensity of her belief and her passionate persuasion. And one more time I have been her first disciple. I have never felt lied to. It's just that Jane has always been certain, where most of us are not. And for her certainty not to be isolating, she needs to bring us all along. In this sense she has always been a missionary. If she was a "visionary," people could dismiss her as off-kilter, an aberration, mentally ill. Her son's a diagnosed schizophrenic. Which is why she feels it so important people believe in her. Crazy is the loneliest of words. But to know the truth is to be admired and connected, and it is especially important that she remains connected to me, because to be cut loose from that bond is to be without love. We must remain on the same wavelength and therefore, for her sake, I must believe.

"I'm just baffled, is all. You have to at least admit that what you're describing..."

"I know," she says comfortingly. "I was surprised by it, too. But when you think about it, it all makes sense. It even seems obvious in retrospect."

Our minds are heading in different directions. The familiar touch of her delicate hand in the grasp of my large one, its coolness, its softness, its physical contact, makes it easier to feel united while, in truth, we're on the first legs of separate journeys. She may or may not be thinking that, but this is what is becoming obvious to me.

"I wish I was near you when you saw all this," I say softly in her ear. "It could've upset you. Maybe we'll see it tonight."

"We will. It happens every night. It happens very late, though. That's the point." She rubs her fingertips along the back of my hand, investigating, soothing, pleasuring. "Sometimes late at night," she intones dreamily, "there's this bright blue flame rising from the roof of Calvary. And one by one, these jet airplanes swoop down towards the blue light as if they're going to crash. But they don't! Just in the nick of time they fly up and away. Just like that. It takes your breath away. I hope you get to see that tonight. It's so beautiful. Marcie said she's never seen anything like it."

I kiss the chubby cheek of the poet who has re-created this scene for me. Her flesh is manna and her vision is precious to me. I feed her a "wow."

"How do they manage that?" I say.

Jane doesn't know because it's something akin to an everyday miracle. There's no good explanation at her fingertips. But she is a witness to it, and this gives her conviction. She is a true believer. Together we will see.

We sit in our mezzanine seats above the Bronx orchestra, the semi-urban symphony led by an invisible baton.

"Do you remember our first date?" Jane sings the question lightly, like a country air.

"The top of the World Trade Center, sitting in the clouds, zero visibility. I remember."

"No, that wasn't a date."

"What was it?"

"I don't know. It wasn't a date. We were just hanging out. I mean Mostly Mozart. We stood on the balcony during intermission looking out over those gold sculptures that hung from the sky."

"If Titans wore earrings . . ." I quip.

"Drop earrings. Titans wouldn't wear drop earrings," she laughs. "You took my hand as if it wasn't the first time and we looked out at all that colossal gold jewelry, surrounded by everyone. It made me horny."

"Then we kissed for hours after the concert, in front of the fountain at Columbus Circle . . ."

"Guys yelled catcalls at us from passing cars!" she exclaims, long-forgotten pink flooding her face.

"We just laughed and ignored them anyway. What was that restaurant, where we got falafels...? And you told me your life story."

"Amy's," she says without a second's hesitation.

"Whatever happened to Amy's?"

"It's gone."

"I wonder what happened to Esther Benson," I continue to free associate.

"I loved Esther Benson," Jane says. "*Linda Goodman's Love Signs*. That's what she was recording. You were a very good teacher. I remember when you reached out in front of me to operate the tape machine and we almost touched. Linda Goodman said we were a perfect match."

"You blushed when I told you my sign!"

"I remember we fucked in Studio C!"

"That was later."

“Maria Rubini called us ‘lovebirds.’”

“Maria Rubini! I haven’t thought of her in years!”

“I miss Talking Books. We worked there over eighteen years ago!”

“It seems like yesterday,” I say, smiling.

“It seems like such a long time ago to me,” says Jane with a sigh.

The cars continue in the distance, back and forth, creating rivulets of dull color that massage our vision. We are grateful for the daylight that reflects the outside world back to us with its incessant busyness and for the cloudiness that keeps out the glare. We sit and contemplate; we nuzzle softly and wait patiently for the jets and the hearses.

Without even the slightest rustle, Alma’s sweet, nasal soprano makes her presence known.

“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Cantore.” Erring on the side of convention, Alma and the others who work here assume that Cantore is Jane’s married name. I imagine myself as a “Mr. Cantore” and enjoy the charade.

Alma fingers Jane’s IV pump, probing and jostling the milky lunch.

“You can stay where you are. I’m OK. Mrs. Cantore was worried about you, weren’t you, Jane?”

“He was very bad,” she replies, still leaning the top of her head against my cheek. “He must have been out with his girlfriend, because he wasn’t with me.”

“Get outta here!” I slowly drawl in Bowery Boys sophistication. That gets a laugh out of everyone.

“Oh no, Mrs. Cantore, you’re his girlfriend,” corrects Alma. “He doesn’t have time for another girlfriend. That’s because he’s a good husband.”

“Well,” I continue the routine, “at least someone appreciates me around here.”

“My husband has a floozy.” Jane plays with the concept dreamily, still nestled against me. It almost sounds like she likes the idea.

“Mrs. Cantore, how are you doing with pain?” asks Alma.

“I’m OK right now,” Jane says.

Alma takes Jane’s wrist and holds it delicately between her thumb and finger.

“Your pulse is good. Soon you can have another Atavan if you want. In another hour or so. Let me take your temperature.”

Jane opens her mouth obediently. She puts herself totally, without resistance, into Alma’s hands. Alma and Marsha and Claudette and Norca are all her mothers. The doctors she sometimes argues with, even fights, but the oncology nurses wrap their cooing voices and warm eyes around her like a hug, even just to announce:

“Ninety-eight. Very good.”

And Jane makes them into her family. She allows herself to talk to them in her girlish voice, soft and high-pitched, playful and vulnerable, sometimes hearty and sometimes needing to be soothed. And in the same even, unrushed flow, they pay attention to the details, listen to her complaints, and encourage. They are her *reliable* mothers.

We are sitting by the shore of Room 1014, the pale blue light of late afternoon saturating the room like the surf that fans over a slapping shoreline. The Bronx day is coming in for a rest while we are set for all the hours ahead of us together; we are a lifeguard on watch. What are we on watch for? The room’s curtains flutter where we have left the corner windowpane pushed open so that the breeze can lighten the room’s stuffy load, and the confined hospital air can escape. Most of the hospital patients prefer the windows closed to protect them from the drafts, but I understand Jane’s phobias of confinement and have always indulged her embrace of outside air, a holdover from a childhood when she and her older sister were locked in captivity by their father. We will remain vigilant over our Bronx “front porch,” like country folk on swinging sofas, letting the night come easy.

And so we indulge in memories of prior sunsets by each other’s side. The elevated views of the Bronx’s eastern tree-lined roads become the Catskills ascending in the distance from the renovated one-room schoolhouse where we holiday each summer. The wooden screen door squeaks and clatters behind me. Jane has been industriously sketching with charcoal pencils, sitting on a beach chair removed from our car’s trunk. I sit down on the stoop facing her. I try not to break her concentration on the garden plants growing along the side of the house which endlessly inspire her. The sun escapes in lazy strokes from the forest around us, intermittently giving the red schoolhouse a fiery glow. I unfold and rustle the Oneonta paper that I carried out of the kitchen, and then we

both stop what we are doing to look up the driveway hill and watch a cluster of black cows make their way home, the occasional moo like a Hank Williams song. "I wish Sandi and Joe would sell this place to us," Jane says for the twentieth time in twenty years. "We could fix it up and come on weekends..." and then she goes on in detailed dreams of what she'd like to do to it. A car comes careening down the steep hill that passes the schoolhouse and with a roar of teenage voices it whooshes away into silence. They're going to town tonight.

The whole piazza at San Marco falls into a blue shadow, glimmery with golden highlights. The setting sun sneaks around the piazza to reflect off Byzantine embellishments and café windows; ballet corps of pigeons fritter the light into broken pieces. We are sitting at an elegant white iron table under a café umbrella, resting after having spent the day traversing Venice's bridges, meandering through her museums, admiring the human form as represented through the centuries in Italianate colors. Our less ideal forms, qualified by time and gravity and, in Jane's case, her fight with disease (and in my case, as a witness to that fight), nevertheless feel like those of honeymooners. We are dancing along the abyss of cancer, though we are not dancing; we are sitting with our chicken and asparagus sandwiches, our sparkling water, listening to the neighboring bands compete by way of Cole Porter or Henry Mancini tunes. A chorus of birds lands on the extended arms of a tourist bearing popcorn, the cacophony of wings reaching a boisterous crescendo. Jane doesn't approve. They're disgusting animals. They carry disease. "People are so stupid," she says. But I find it hard to criticize a circus. And besides, so many beautiful creatures carry disease; they cannot be unappreciated because death waits beneath their pageantry. I would not give them up, I'm thinking.

We are setting up our balcony for a summer evening dinner. We play U-2 loudly so that the music will escape through the screened sliding doors. "*Last time we met it was a low-lit room / We were as close together as bride and groom / We ate the food, we drank the wine / Everybody having a good time / Except you / You were talking about the end of the world.*" We eat the food, we drink the wine, we sit amidst Jane's makeshift garden and watch the lights flicker on and off from the apartments across the middle-income development's canyon-way. Jane has painted the balcony floor a swimming pool blue and

soon everything is that color, the city's pollution and the sunset uniting for one moment into a psychedelic splendor before it fades. "This is a good wine," I say as I sip. Her cousin Bobby gave us the wine, her cousin Donna the pasta bowls we are using. Underscoring the fatalistic rock and roll is the persistent *kerplunk kerplunk* from the teenage boys playing basketball six floors below us and across the way. We savor the pasta sauce along with the night; we are scraping our bowls when Jane jumps up and stamps her feet by the corner of the balcony. "Get away!" she shouts. She bends over the large spider plant in the corner. "Those fucking squirrels!" she says.

And now it's a navy blue of a New York City night. We are our younger selves strolling through New York City's neighborhood dedicated to San Marco. We cross St. Mark's Place in lockstep, our bodies fitted side by side, walking as one body connected at the hip, comfortably, sexily, arms around each other's waist. Jane has a beautiful soprano voice that she usually saved for her son's benefit only, but he's at home now, too old for a baby-sitter, and she breaks her pattern of musical shyness by singing Boz Skaggs's "Asia." I join her for the chorus, "Love me forever / ever and ever," as we pass East Village landmarks: The Orchidia Restaurant, the St. Mark's Cinema, the Orpheum Theatre, the funky jewelry stores shooting up between the decades-old mom-and-pop establishments, the Ukrainian butcher shop and the Polish coffee shop happily neighboring Moshe's bakery. We glide right through the other East Village nighttime players as we claim the sidewalk for ourselves. We move onto "Imagine"; we sing softly for our own pleasure and the thrill of how surprisingly good we sound together.

The sunset is fading, the streetlights have mysteriously gone on when we weren't looking, and the Bronx puts on its shadowy subterranean colors. I hear the rustle of an overcoat behind us and notice Beverly has arrived. She is a motherly black woman, impeccable in dress and manner, who, when she is not reading her Bible, dotes on her charge as much as her charge will allow.

"Oh, I won't bother you both," she says. "You can ignore me if you want. I'll be out in the hall, Jane dear."

"Oh, hi, Beverly," sings Jane. "Is it that late already?" Beverly is the only attendant I've found who Jane has totally trusted. Sometimes Beverly is a little too hands-on for Jane and her independent ways, but Jane loves having someone doting she can depend on and she

allows Beverly control, if at times reluctantly. Mostly Beverly uses her power gingerly, using a soft touch to get Jane to do what Beverly thinks is best.

“How are we this evening?” asks Beverly. “Last night Mrs. Cantore was a bit agitated. She asked for you all the time. You wanted to be home with your husband, didn’t you, Mrs. Cantore?”

“Yes, I did,” Jane said, looking longingly in my direction. “I wanted you to take me home.”

“Was it a tough night?” I ask Beverly.

“Oh, we were fine. We had a fine night together. Sometimes we needed more Atavan, didn’t we? The nighttime, you know. She gets nervous and all. But it wasn’t too bad. We talked and she tells me all about herself and I talk about myself, don’t I, Mrs. Cantore? She’s such a sympathetic listener. And we watched a little television, but not too much. She slept most of the time. I think we were fine.”

“I wanted to go home,” Jane said, not having moved her glance from my face. She wanted to be home with her twenty-six plants which I’ve had to manage not to kill; with her sketch pads and her pastels; with her canary, Willie, to take care of and talk to and fuss over; with her floor-to-ceiling shelves of poetry books, many of them by friends; and with me. The apartment is filled with familiars to keep Jane company. And if she can watch *Rosie O’Donnell* and *Regis and Kathy* in the hospital, they are even better at home where the sounds of the neighborhood can fly up to our sixth-floor apartment and she can watch the people off to market, the kids playing at recess time at the parochial school, watch the same parking garage attendants she’s had in her view for the last three years, all of them neighbors. She has always been a lover of neighborhoods, and she doesn’t have that out the window at Einstein. There the only community is that of doctors and interns and nurses and orderlies, all of whom she has gotten to know and many of whom to like, but none of whom she wants to be around. Because this isn’t home.

“Well, I’m going to go change into my comfortable clothes and then I’ll sit outside so you two lovebirds can have more time together,” says Beverly and she leaves us to the evening light.

“Don’t you want me to come home?” Jane asks, forlornly.

“Of course I do! I can’t wait for you to come back to me, you know that. But right now you’re not ready. When they take out the catheter...”

“I don’t know if I can believe you.”

I’m too tired to be able to think of how best to react, how best to get her mind off of this track. I emit a sigh, and say, “I don’t know what to tell you. If you don’t know if you can believe me...” All I can do is shrug my shoulders. There is this space between us which we both wait for the other to cross. *Show me I can trust you. Show me you have faith in me.* We remain connected by the warm sensual touch of our hands, but we are separated by our mutual grievances.

“Hey, is it OK to come in?” a hushed male voice breaks the silence.

“It’s Ray,” I say and let go of her hand to stand up and welcome Jane’s brother.

He is not alone. He has brought his daughter, Chryssie, with him. She is in her mid-thirties, just a few years older than Luke, Jane’s son from a short-lived marriage when she was a teenage runaway. This is only the third time Chryssie has seen her aunt since she was around five years old, the first two times being within the last few days at the hospital. Chryssie had always reminded Ray of Jane, especially because of her thick-headed, rebellious nature, and over the years he had unintentionally created a deep bond between Chryssie and her aunt by often calling his daughter by her aunt’s name when mad at her, and then telling Jane about it when we had last seen him. That was twenty years ago when Jane told him of our plans to get married. Chryssie has Jane’s coloring, her high cheekbones and black eyes, and has even of late developed a weight problem like both her father and aunt. No matter how different their style, her presence at Jane’s bedside was uncanny at first. Jane had taken Chryssie’s face between her hands and said in amazement that it was like looking into the face of her own daughter. Since then Chryssie has tried to accompany her father as often as possible, to try to cement the bond which had only had a spiritual foundation prior to this hospital bedside relationship. She is now Jane’s lady-in-waiting.

“How are you, Janie? How you feeling today?” asks Ray. “You feeling any better?” He looks like Richard Gere with an extra fifty pounds and he seductively, Richard Gere-like, commiserates with his baby sister. It suddenly strikes me that when her cousins, or anyone else, would mention how attractive they thought Richard Gere was, Jane would contemptuously call him a ferret-face. But

all the Cantores in the room are strikingly attractive, and definitely look related. "Isn't my brother handsome?!" Jane had gushed when he had first come back into her life merely days ago.

"I'm sad. I want to go home."

"But you feeling OK?" Ray persisted.

"I'm tired. I feel a little pain. I'm ready for my Atavan soon."

"Should I get a nurse?" worries Chryssie.

"No, Paz will bring it soon. Help me back into bed." All three of us, like too many cooks, tangle and untangle the wires, move chairs back and forth and offer her hands to help her back into bed.

"I want to go home," Jane says when settled into the pillows. "No one will allow me to go home. They want to keep me here."

"As soon as they can take out the catheter, we'll hear what Dr. Koenig has to say," I reply.

"You see," she says quietly to her brother. "He doesn't love me anymore. He doesn't want me home. He's tired of me."

"Janie, of course Ed wants you home. He's crazy about you. Anyone can see that."

"You'll be home sooner than you know," adds Chryssie. "You'll see."

"They have rules here. They don't allow anyone to leave! It's all red tape. They just move you from room to room. And I don't know *what* happens to some people. They just disappear! Ed doesn't believe me, but it's true. Ray, can I stay with you if Ed doesn't want me?"

More than thirty years ago, Jane had gone to Ray to ask him to let her live with him and not her crazy sister. He told her instead that a foster home would be the best thing for her, and that was when she ran away. He has to be aware of the parallels in this question as he tries to steer away from answering her.

"Ed wants you, believe me."

"Honey, I love you. Please, it's just a matter of a few days."

"You promise?"

"Absolutely." What's the purpose right now in worrying about the fine details? Just give her a definite answer, that's what she needs.

Jane pushes the button on the side of the bed for the nurse's station.

"Can I help you?" blares the speaker above the bed.

"Yes, nurse. I need my pain medication."

“OK, we’ll be right over, Mrs. Cantore.”

Jane’s face looks haunted. She pulls me to her side.

“Egg”—she uses the nickname she has invented for me—“why are my father and sister here?”

She asks me in her soft sleepy voice, yet not so soft that Ray and Chryssie can’t hear.

“What do you mean, doll?” I ask her.

“Didn’t you see them? Go look. They’re in the room across the hall. What are they doing here?”

Ray looks sucker-punched. Chryssie blinks her eyes in confusion, looking from her father to me.

“Jane.” I stroke the back of her hand. “Don’t worry about your father and sister. They died a long time ago, remember?”

She looks like she’s trying to battle the heavy weight of her eyelids by trying to focus on her thoughts.

“Then what are they doing here? Isn’t that strange?”

“I think you’re hallucinating. I think it’s the medication, sweetheart. Ray and Chryssie are here, Beverly’s outside the room, I’m here . . . no one else. Your father and sister aren’t here. They can’t bother you.”

“I could’ve sworn...” she says as she slowly slides off into a narcotic sleep.

“What did she say?” whispers Ray, who knows full well what she said. He didn’t mean to bring anyone besides Chryssie, but apparently he’s brought invisible company, and he’s not happy about it. If he could’ve killed his father himself, perhaps he would have, now only to find that even so, his father might one day be staring down at him on his deathbed. Now in his Cantore eyes, he’s afraid he’s brought his father’s and sister’s eyes with him, and he looks like he would like to tear them from his sockets.

When Paz arrives with a small plastic bag to attach to the IV pole, Jane looks like the medication has started kicking in before it even enters her bloodstream; just the anticipation of it eases her. She is certain of Paz’s love and tenderness and competence; it is something the rest of us still must prove. She lets the grayness soothe her, lets herself feel the attention of all those who are there for her—Paz flicking plastic tubing with her finger, Beverly sitting just outside the door in silent conversation with Jesus, Chryssie with her head atilt sympathetically and her long dark curls cascading over

her right shoulder, Ray stolidly claiming his ground, and me drinking her up with my guilt-ridden eyes as if it would be unforgivable to let her out of my sight for a second—and momentarily she allows herself to feel mothered: she closes her eyes.

I can't keep up with her fantasies, her deliriums. I don't know where her drugged mind wanders. I don't have a growth that keeps my stomach in a tight vise or a stint somewhere under my back; don't know what it feels like to be invaded by technology or disease. I don't know what it's like to have memories of the Bronx in the 50s: I wasn't there to see her between her older brother's arms as he rode her on his bike or to see her with baby Chryssie in *her* arms when she was fourteen and wanting something desperately to love that would singularly love her back. I don't know if there is room for me or Luke or the last twenty years of makeshift East Village family living in her consciousness when she submerges as she does now. I just know how blank we feel as we witness her dip silently into her vast reservoir for a little R & R.

"Maybe she'll sleep a little," says Paz, studying Jane before she lightly steps about her business and out the door. We three stand around as if contemplating a gravestone marker before we catch ourselves and step back to acknowledge each other with our eyes.

Ray comes around to put his arm around me. "How you holding up?" he asks me softly.

"I'm OK. Always tired, but OK. She's better in the early part of the day, and then it gets a little hairy as the sun goes down."

"She was really great on Sunday, when my mother was here... and the cousins," says Chryssie. "Looking at pictures... My mother was so glad to see her." Jane had told Chryssie *not* to bring her mother, but Chryssie brought her anyway, deciding it was time for a reconciliation. Suddenly, thirty years of resentment seemed irrelevant and picayune. "We were so young and foolish!" cried Tina when they hugged. "We didn't know what we were doing!" And Jane beamed in the presence of everyone's love. In that moment, in a hospital many years after she first needed it, Jane finally was able to feel the love and care of her whole family, at least of the family that survived.

Ray looks uncomfortable. "Yeah, she was good on Sunday. Except for—"

"Well, that was a mistake, Dad."

"I shouldn't'a done it. I thought it would make things better. I don't know..."

When Ray had received a copy of Jane's book of poems from her cousin Donna, he read it hungrily, looking for references to the family drama. Before most people arrived at the hospital that Sunday, Ray had asked Jane if the poem that included the line, "I can hear you call my name in the street," was a reference to the time he had gone through the East Village looking for her when she had run away from home.

"Did you know I was out there looking for you every day, going up and down the streets calling your name? Did you hear me?" he had asked.

"The poem's not about you," she said tersely.

"Oh," he had said disappointedly. "I mean, you know I always loved you, don't you? I never didn't love you."

And in one move, with all the power in her body, Jane sat up in the bed, huge with fury.

"You didn't give a shit about me!"

And Ray quickly retreated, Chrissy aghast at the side of the bed at how her father had clumsily tipped over the entire fucking apple cart, deciding that this was the time to bring up years of primarily painful memories: when Jane was on morphine, mustering her energy to stay alive and well.

"I'm sorry, Janie," Ray said, his face all red. "Forget it. I didn't mean to upset you."

Jane sank back into the bed and covered her face with her hands.

"You waited too long for this conversation..." she mumbled.

"I know, I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

And she appeared to. The room went back to tentative small talk, Chrissy stroked Jane's hand, little by little places were found for affectionate jokes, and Ray joined in. But he has been berating himself over his contretemps ever since.

"You know, back then, when all this happened..." he begins. I motion him to step outside of the room with me, outside of Jane's possible hearing. Chrissy, who had never been filled in on anything about her father's family life—other than that it was too painful for him to talk about—looks torn between hearing what she can that would explain her father to her and spending as much time with her newfound aunt as possible by watching over Jane while she sleeps.

She starts to follow us but then slowly makes her way back to the chairs I had moved to the window, turns one around, and sits by Jane's side.

"I was just a kid myself, then," he goes on in a low voice. "Eighteen when I got married to get away from my father. And when Jane was fifteen I was still in my early twenties. I couldn't take care of someone like her. She was trouble. She was hanging out with the wrong crowd, smoking cigarettes. And my sister Ginny was nuts. So I understood why Jane couldn't stand living with her and Uncle Al anymore. But I didn't know how to take care of her. None of us did. No one had ever taken care of *us*! We were too screwed up, I admit that. So I thought a foster home would be the best thing for her, people who could give her a real family and straighten her out. That's what I was thinking."

I look over towards Jane; she looks wintry white, as if she's slowly being covered in snow, her mouth slightly ajar, deeply overcome by sleep. This is her chance to hear Ray's story and her chance to answer it, to rebut his benevolence with the indifference and hostility she remembered, the anger of the brother who was just plain tired of dealing with her and her needs, who resented someone as needy as she then was, loving him, depending on him, hoping he was her salvation, the way he once had been, using his fists against their father. I realize she would have answered him the way she already had. She would have told that to anyone in her family who tried to bring up the past. No, if she wanted a family now, it had to be without looking back, without absolving them, without blaming them either. She needed their help now, and this was their chance, and Ray's, to finally look after the baby. And I know that is why he is here. So I don't say anything. I just listen.

And now we are both listening as words bubble up from Jane's depths, little moans of words evaporating into the room's cozy atmosphere. Her eyes flutter, struggling to open; she is grasping for contact. Chryssie bends over her, as if to scoop up her wishes, and Jane turns her head to her, her neck a long bow of yearning.

"I can't understand you, Aunt Janie," says Chryssie. "What can I do for you?"

Her words sound like a child's whimper.

"Where do you have to go?" is Chryssie's reply.

Tired of this communication, Jane wails my name. She's ready for the shorthand approach. Chryssie falls by the wayside of her consciousness and she makes a direct cry to me.

"Help me! Ed!"

I rush over to the side of the bed opposite Chryssie and ask her to tell me what is ailing her.

"I need...I need my bathrobe! Quick, please!" Her hands clap my arm to hasten me.

"Are we going somewhere?" I ask her as I bring her red flannel robe to her.

"Yes!" she cries with an urgency that is almost joyous, but not quite. "We're going home!"

"Jane—"

"We're going home!" She is stern and insistent. "We're going home." She whispers in a loud breath of words. "You've got to get me out of here. You don't know what goes on!" Then she turns to Chryssie and asks sweetly, "Do you see my slippers there, sweetheart?" as if she's forgotten her name.

"Jane!" I try to focus her by grabbing her shoulders and riveting her with my eyes, trying to reach way down into her where she can hear me. I point out the handiwork attaching her back to all the plastic engineering, but she shushes me with these words: "It's not safe here. People disappear. No one's allowed to go home! They don't tell me what they've done with them. Please, Ed, please, please, take me home, I know you don't want me to disappear! Where would you find me? Imagine how you'd feel!"

Before I can reply to her heartfelt plea, assuming I could even find the words, Beverly comes into the room to see what is going on.

"Are we going for a walk, Mrs. Cantore? That's a nice idea."

"Yes, a walk! A walk!" cries Jane, throwing her legs over the side of the bed. If I don't help her, she will muster the energy to do everything herself.

"OK, let's go for a walk," I say, signaling to Ray and Chryssie my facial equivalent of a shrug. I motion them towards the IV pole on the other side of the bed so as to wrap her wiring around one of its arms and to unplug the pump's wire from the wall socket. But Jane is already on her way.

"Jane!" I cry, to prevent her pulling wires straight out of her body. "Watch it!"

“Now!” is her reply. “We’ve got to go now!” and she’s off, Beverly receding out of the way, Chrissy and Ray doing a Keystone Kops routine with the pole and wires, and me running to catch up with her, her catheter (which I hurriedly unwrapped from a bed railing) in my hands. I hand it over to our IV team to attach to the rest of their equipment as I hustle out the door.

Soon we are making a calamitous procession along the corridors of Ten South: her highness wearing red flannel trimmed with blue posies, I holding her arm tightly, her brother and niece running with her train of wires, and Beverly following from a distance, watching over us.

“Which way is the exit?” asks Jane urgently.

“Jane, we can’t leave the building. Turn around! Turn around and look at all the equipment that is following you.”

But she doesn’t look. Her eyes are on alert for an escape hatch, an exit door, an elevator, a hidden tunnel, a great escape. She will not bend her will for those who just cannot understand, who do not know, who have not experienced. She will take care of herself if she must, and her brain is working feverishly, devising a plan of delivery.

“Which way?” she repeats. “You know where it is—let’s go!” She is pulling me forward, having found a strength that surpasses mine.

“Well, we can take a walk in that direction, but we can’t leave for another few days. And then you’ll come home.”

“Good! Now show me!” And we scurry along.

“Hello, Mrs. Cantore,” says one of the nurses as we approach the Ten South reception desk. “On a walk with your family, are we?”

“Yes, Anita!” Jane says in a loud, clear voice, her eyes never swerving from her focus for a second. “We’re going for a walk!”

“That’s nice.”

“Bye, Anita!” she says, her expression unchanged throughout the conversation.

“Here, we go in here,” she says, attempting to drag me into a semi-private patient’s room, one she had been in in one of her many stays at the hospital over the last three years. The two new patients are invisible, opaque in sleep and the room’s pitch-black darkness. But I am fully aware that the room is occupied, if she is not, and I try to prevent her entry.

“Where are you going?” I ask with a laugh, as if this is merely a silly mistake.

“This is the way, let me in,” she whispers, not looking at me.

“No, Jane, there are patients sleeping...”

“I know, I know! But there’s an exit in there. We have to hurry. We won’t make any noise.”

“No, honey, you’re mistaken.” I still have her by the arm. She struggles to slip it free, casually, but forcefully.

“Don’t tell *me!* This was *my* room, not yours. And I say there’s an exit door in there.”

“No, Janie, there are people...” says Ray.

“...sleeping!” continues Chrissy.

“Jane, dear,” says Beverly from behind, “I have a good idea. Why don’t we go back to our room—”

“No,” she says urgently, “there’s a way out through there! *Please!*”

“I’ll show you where the exit is,” I tell her. “It’s not here. It’s further down the hall. This-a-way...” I said, gesturing away from the room.

“Are you OK, Mrs. Cantore?” asks Anita, who by now has noticed a hint of a problem.

Jane looks thunderstruck. She steps back and turns directly towards me.

“Oh my God! Oh my God!” she repeats, turning gray in horror. She holds her hands in front of her as if to keep me away. “You’re one of them! You’re one of them! I thought—I thought you were on my side. You’re working with them!”

“I’m not working with anybody! You’re going to wake these patients!” I am urging her with the most intense, hissy whisper I can imagine.

And then, with the strength of her fury, Jane walks right up to me and fills the doorway with her presence so that she seems to tower over my six-foot-four frame.

“*Get out of my way!*” she bellows, no longer the invalid but the bully. She looks determined to walk right through me if she has to. As if throwing myself in her path, I stand up as tall as I can and refuse to budge. I don’t know what to expect.

“No,” I calmly tell her.

By now the nurses have realized, at the very least by her outcry, that something is up and they start to scurry around the reception desk. Jane looks at me as if I have betrayed her. She exhales fumes of defeat and frustration.

“I don’t believe you!” she says in contempt, and turns towards the direction we came from.

The posse starts up in pursuit. Except for me. For one second, and one second only, I exhale, cleansing my lungs, as if in one breath I can be clean of this painful, absurd experience, and, unsoiled, look Jane straight in the eye again. I take a new deep breath and move on now.

Jane’s energy has not relented; she urges her wakened, weighted body forward, catapulting it back towards her room as if going back to bed was the exit she had in mind. Beverly is relieved at the prospect and compliments Jane on her good sense, when Jane, oblivious to Beverly, continues past her door toward the corner rooms on the wing. Everyone is sure she’s failed to recognize her room, and they shout out her mistake to her, but it’s not a mistake. She is heading directly to the last room on the corridor, a room she’s never been in before, and, consequently, one she seems sure leads the way to a new beginning. Ray and Chrissy shout out as Jane heads into its bright light. We tumble into it with her, Alma following, expecting to see her overwhelming the patient assigned to it.

But we are overwhelmed instead. The room is spanking clean and empty, the bed has been rolled away from the wall and lifted high, lightened of any load, stripped of all hospital linen. It is a monument to a previous departure, of a patient who has succeeded in escaping from the hospital before Jane could manage to, or, in converse, evidence of one who has been “disappeared.” The room’s blankness is startling. Startling to Jane is that there is no exit in the corner of the room through which she can flee, nor which would explain to her the means of egress or of sequestration of its previous tenant.

“Where’s the exit?” she demands, as if someone’s pulled a fast one on her.

“This is just another patient’s room,” I begin to explain. “There is no exit—”

“I’m not talking to you!” is her response. “I don’t know what they did with the exit.” She’s pacing back and forth, just one step

in either direction, forming tight circles of flight leading her back to where she stands, a trapped animal. “Chryssie, can you help me?”

“What, Aunt Janie?”

“Pick up that phone and call a car service. We can meet them in the lobby. We do that all the time. A car service can take us. I’ll pay you back, don’t worry.”

Chryssie looks back and forth from Jane to the rest of us, unsure of what to do. Jane wastes no time and scurries forcefully over to the phone, picks up the receiver and dials “0.” She stares intently into space, and keeps pushing the “0” key.

“No one’s picking up!”

“Jane, they unplug the phone service when a patient leaves,” I try to calm her.

“Operator! Operator!”

Alma matter-of-factly walks up to Jane. “Mrs. Cantore, why don’t you just stay in this room for a while. There’s no one in this room tonight, so if you want to sit here for a while instead of in your room that’s OK.”

Jane looks over to Alma as if she’s getting some much-needed relief.

“Thank you, Alma. That’s fine.”

Alma leaves the premises, having informed me that she will check to see if Jane can now be given more medication. The rest of us are all gathered around Jane, waiting for new instructions for the game for which only she knows the rules.

“Maybe I should call Suzanne,” Jane thinks out loud. “I know. I should call Suzanne! She’ll help me. Why didn’t I think of that?”

Chryssie and Beverly look confused. Suzanne’s name had not come up before, to their knowledge. Who is this savior?

“Suzanne—she’s the woman who was here the other day, wasn’t she?” asks Ray. “Who I spoke to. Her therapist, right? Suzanne’s your therapist, Janie?”

“Yes, yes. I know she’ll come and get me. She’s always there for me whenever there’s an emergency. I need to call her.”

This is going nowhere. “Jane, it’s Sunday. Suzanne’s not in her office.”

Jane turns to me contemptuously. “She checks her messages,” she says simply, not bothering to add “you jerk,” as that goes without saying.

"I've got to get this phone to work!" She pounds the receiver with her finger repeatedly, trying to force it into submission.

"Now, Jane," says Beverly, "you don't want to break the phone. Why can't this wait till tomorrow? Your friend Suzanne will be there tomorrow, and there's nothing going on tonight that can't be dealt with tomorrow. What do you say?"

"Tomorrow will be too late! This is the time for me to get out of here. The hospital will be busier on a Monday; that's why I have to get out tonight. If Ed won't help me, then Suzanne can. I won't let you keep me locked up here," she addresses to me. "Suzanne won't allow it either."

I walk over to where Ray and Chryssie stand and grab the IV pole with one hand, the translucent tubing that heads out to Jane on the other.

"Jane, look at this! Look at it! You're all connected to wires. Look at it."

"You have a bad attitude!" she exclaims. "You can make things happen if you want to enough. You just don't want to. I'm going back to my room. I can call Suzanne from there." She is panting heavily in excitement, as if she's getting out of breath.

With tremendous relief, everyone encourages her relocation. A great hubbub starts up, an arrangement of bodies and medical equipment, people shuffling out of each other's way, Jane with her hands in the air like a toddler signaling to be picked up as she tries to direct her entourage.

"We're going into the other room! Hurry! The other room!" As Ray and Chryssie struggle with the wires, Jane turns to me, forgetting my role as her nemesis to mutter, "My father and sister always gum up the works!" And then to everyone: "We've got to hurry!" Ray takes a moment to be appalled by what he's overheard, and Chryssie uses it to sum up her understanding of what is going on, before they can put it behind them and keep up with the wagon train.

Jane is waiting for me when I get into the room, impatient and in turmoil, penned in a cage, anxious to get out.

"I need to know if you will call Suzanne for me. I don't remember her number."

"OK. I will call her. Try to calm down."

And then everything stops as Jane pulls back her arm and zings me with a fast, hard slap across my face with all the power she can muster...which is plenty. She's a dynamo of power fighting for her life.

I am startled. I can feel a sting where her fingernail traveled across my cheek, her slap being both powerful and a little clumsy.

I want to be her savior, but instead...

No matter my shock, or the depths of my anguish, I know I have more to do and do not take the time to nurse my outrage and despair. There is an audible intake of breaths from those around me, perhaps someone calls her name, I don't know. I grab her hand forcefully and stare her in the face sternly.

"*You can't hit me!*" I say with emphasis.

"Don't you condescend to me!" she cries in fury.

By now I've grabbed both arms to steady her by force and focus her attention on me.

"You cannot hit me! You can't hit!" I am outraged but manage to transcend the outrage so as to get through to her. "I will help you, but you must calm down. The nurses will tie you down if you act like this and I...don't...want them to! OK? Please..."

"But why aren't you helping me? I need Suzanne! Call her, call her."

"I'll call her, but just—"

"Call her now!"

Beverly puts her arms around her and engages her in conversation, I don't know what about, probably about how everything will work itself out, how Suzanne will save her. I dial Suzanne's office number, the last three digits the reverse of the first three digits, easy to remember.

The phone rings once...twice...three times...four. The machine hasn't picked up. Fifth ring...sixth...*What's going on?* I'm thinking. *Why now?!*

I've no brain cells left. I look at Ray, perplexed.

"The machine's not picking up!" I tell him so Jane can't hear.

None of us wants to see Jane explode again. We want to see her at ease, once again with faith she's taken care of. Ray looks at me as if he had never imagined I was a numbskull before.

"Lie!" he whispers, excitedly. It never occurred to me that to take charge could mean taking charge of the facts.

“Oh. Hi, Suzanne,” I start my monologue, imitating the monotone customary for addressing an answering machine. “This is Ed Zucker...”

“Is she there?” perks up Jane, expectantly.

I motion with my hand for her to wait. The phone is still ringing. I continue to address the gods of night who seem light years away from us on this particularly dark and scattered night. They do not pick up their calls.

“I’m calling for Jane from the hospital...” I begin when Jane, energized with determination, gets up to grab the phone.

“Let me talk to her!”

“Wait! I’m talking!”—to the sound of Suzanne’s phone ringing. I’m in the middle of my act here and am about to be exposed as a fraud. “Hold on a minute!”

Jane grabs the receiver but I hold onto it as if fighting for *my* life. I am determined to save *something* tonight, even if it is the mere illusion that I am helping her to escape her fate.

“Let *me* speak to her!” Jane pleads fiercely, begging with her eyes widescreen. “Please. *Hello Suzanne!*”

Our heads almost butt as we form a passionate *ménage à trois* with the telephone receiver, she devoting her attentions to the mouthpiece and I to the earpiece, while the phone continues to purr imperviously, “Nobody home, nobody home.”

“*Suzanne! It’s Jane! I’m calling because I need your help!*”

The jig should be up by now, but instead Jane seems oblivious to the ringing tone.

“It’s really important that you call me as soon as you receive this message!”

And now it seems as if she’s oblivious to the phone itself, as she floats back a step or two while continuing to leave the message.

“If you could please call me at Albert Einstein in the Bronx, I would greatly appreciate it! My number is 718-624-1014. 718-624-1014.”

By the time she has come to the end of her message (“I hope to hear from you soon. Thank you!”) she is several feet away, bathed in her own inner spotlight, her voice at a friendly melodious sing-song. Jane has made her connection and she is at peace.

I hang up the receiver in awe of her transformation. She is an angel now, blessing us all with the power of her beaming light.

She looks off and up to the side as if communing with the future.

“Suzanne will help us,” she says, encouragingly. “You’ll see. Everything will be all right.”

I’m not quite sure what’s happened. I feel the wind has been knocked out of me, but perhaps for the good. We all stand christened by a storm and peaceful in its dewy aftermath.

“Yes, everything will be all right, Jane dear,” says Beverly, extending her hand in aid, expecting and hoping to escort her charge to bed.

“Yeah, she’s a good therapist, right?” Ray chips in awkwardly. “So she’ll give you the help you need. She’ll take care of things.”

“That’s wonderful!” encourages Chrissy, trying to be of help. We’re all so excited that Jane is no longer in the mighty grip of panic that we want to shower her with praise.

I still feel a bit cast from Jane’s inner circle, having played the role of archfiend in her perception of things. But Jane’s perception has made a 180° turn and she walks her joy over to me as if we’ve both won a prize.

“Everything will be all right! Don’t worry,” she says, as if I had been the patient and she the provider of moral support. “Oh, look at your face! You’re bleeding!” She holds my face in the grip of her right hand as she studies the scratch that she left on my cheek. “Beverly, can you reach a tissue for me? Oh, poor baby, you’re hurt. Relax; I’m going to take care of it.” And with her pinky in the air, she delicately and precisely touches the tissue to my cheek, dabbing it carefully. “That’s better,” she says. Her face is so close to mine; her eyes gently wash my right cheek with loving concern. I take hold of her ministering hand so as to show my thanks for her care.

“I’m OK,” I assure her. “Thank you.”

“I’m almost finished,” she replies, doggedly cleaning me up. “That’s better.” She doesn’t mention her physical assault; she merely takes care of her loving business.

Once I am completely doctored by the patient, the patient—her job all done—confesses to exhaustion coming on. But she’s not ready for bed.

“Come to the windows,” Jane says to me. “Keep me company by the windows for a little while.”

As if they are a backstage crew, everyone bustles around, moving poles and wires and furniture to their rightful places on cue. I hold

Jane's hand aloft so as to prevent entanglement with wires, and then escort her, minuet-like, to our improvised love seat.

"I think I'm too tired for any more company," Jane announces both with a tone of apology and declaration. In either case, it's the exit line Ray and Chryssie have been waiting for, wiped out themselves by the evening's furor; now they can leave with a sense that the drama is coming to a close. Chryssie wraps her arms around Jane's shoulders from behind the chair, giving her a farewell blessing; Ray is next in line and pats her shoulder while giving her a brother's kiss on the cheek. They turn to me simultaneously and I'm struck by the look in their eyes. This evening they've shared an experience with me after a lifetime of us never having had any shared experiences. This evening has secured a friendship between us. We've gone on an expedition, been there and come back. This is how you know someone, their eyes say.

"Get some rest," is what their lips say.

"I'll see ya tomorrow," says Ray and he gives me a hug. I stand surprised. Chryssie pecks my cheek and tilts her head in sympathy.

"Good night, Ed," she says. "Good night, Aunt Janie!"

"Good night," Jane replies, her fatigue reducing her voice to a loud whisper.

"Oh my, what an evening," sums up Beverly. "Well, darling, I'm going to sit right outside, reading the Good Book in case you two need me." And that's exactly what she does.

I seat myself next to my lover of twenty-two years and put her hand in mine. Twenty-two years ago we sat across a small table from each other eating falafels, Mozart and Schubert still echoing in our consciousness. Twenty-two years ago Jane opened herself up to me, overwhelming me with her life's tale of family brutality, teenage recklessness, and over-the-top misfortune; negligent families, a depraved father, a psychotic sister, opportunistic strangers, a baby boy cursed with severe handicaps, and an unloving young husband who expressed himself with his fists. Tales of the Bronx in the fifties, of Yonkers during the generation gap, and the East Village at the height of its psychedelic infamy. Tales of a girl who saw her mother die of cancer when she was only nine and too young to understand how someone could love you so little as to leave you so unprotected so young. I listened to these tales in amazement and awe. I thought I could learn a lot from someone who had been through so much,

and yet was seemingly filled with a greater capacity for joy than I, in my comparatively sheltered life, could ever imagine.

Only many years after, in fact the year before Jane was diagnosed, did I discover that I had missed the entire point of these stories.

“I was giving you fair warning,” Jane told me one night in an Outback Steakhouse in Vestal, New York, a night during which we were unceremoniously and mutually tearing our marriage apart. “I was giving you a chance to get away! Don’t you get it?”

“What are you talking about?!”

“So that if you were going to leave me, it would be before I fell in love with you!”

If that was her intention, she had totally failed: I had gotten the wrong message. Far from noticing the damaged woman she was trying to reveal, I had only noticed the miracle she was instead.

And now, so many difficult and lovely years later, she still worries that I will abandon her, but it is she, in fact, who is leaving me. So, tonight, we are sitting side by side on the tenth floor of Albert Einstein Medical Center, facing a Bronx that is slowly turning out its lights. In the distance, moonlight glimmers over the Sound, and contrasting rows of headlights pierce the darkness. “I love you, baby,” I say as I turn to kiss her forehead, which lies on my shoulder. “I love you, too,” she replies. The day has been numbing, but after we’ve had a chance to let it slide from our consciousness, the night begins to seem magical and new and dangerous at the same time. Calvary Hospital sits down below us in the foreground of our view, and like a stage show that is about to start, it is suddenly lit up with fanfare by the lights of approaching jets, and now those lights spotlight a beautiful cold blue flame. It sits on the center of Calvary’s roof, beckoning, beckoning, and we gasp with the pleasure of shared love when the jets, so close to their pale blue immolation, veer just in time, straight up to the heavens.