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In the Dark

That first time, early August and the middle of a heat wave, she thought she'd just get some air. Simply stand on the cement patio, quietly gaze at the stars caught in the net of our maple tree.

But my mother had forgotten, after eighteen years of marriage and five children, how to simply stand and look. In church she was distracted by the altar boy's badly cut hair. In the park she unobtrusively deadheaded geraniums. That first night, it wasn't desire or even the desire for desire that drew her into the cool, prickly grass. Instead it was the tipped-up cover on our sandbox, calling her to right it.

Our ranch house was in a subdivision planted on long-ago potato fields. Sometimes as he cultivated his Big Boys, my eager father spaded up a shriveled tuber or a shard of thick white china, a wonder to us children, so little concept did we have of a past. Everything was ours and brand new, and not to be happy was betrayal. Our aunts and uncles, still mired in Queens and the Bronx, took the train out to sit on our new lawn furniture, enjoy burgers from my father's grill.

Every house for blocks was just the same, down to the slender sapling yearning against its guy wires on the edge of the lawn. The fathers had fought in the war, and here was their reward: the rows of snug houses crouched beneath the sky, where on sultry afternoons the thunder clouds massed like another, less benign prospect. Both summer and winter the mothers stayed mostly inside, only leaning out the door to shake a dust mop, call us home for lunch. I can see my mother harvesting clean socks from the aluminum wash line my father set up for her on the edge of the patio, or carrying bags of groceries in from the car, but she had far too much work to loll around in a lawn chair. Besides, sun made her squint.

Night was her time, my father Canadian-Clubbed into oblivion, the younger children asleep at last. I was sixteen that summer and had my first real boyfriend. Dave was two years older but I was the one who decided whether we went to the movies or bowling, when we started kissing and where we stopped. Oldest of five, I was used

to the burden of being in charge. When I came home, itchy and discontented, she was almost always sitting on the couch in her prim cotton nightgown, reading. The smoke from her cigarette snaked upwards in the lamplight, and the radio played softly. Sometimes the basement dryer would be thumping like a buried heart. *There's some iced tea*, she'd say, or *Careful not to wake your sister*. Never once a leading question, a raised eyebrow. As wild as her imagination was, she couldn't imagine the possibility of my being different from her. Like her, I was serious, shy, not popular with other girls. Good. Though all around us things hurtled toward liberation and apocalypse, she didn't worry.

My father, that handsome, hapless city boy, had built our sandbox, and the plywood cover had warped. Nothing he made held its own—the patio he'd poured already showed cracks, and the swing he'd suspended from the maple tree had inched itself so low my sisters swung on their bellies, dragging their fingers in the dust. That hot August night my mother crossed the yard, her pink nightgown white in the darkness. The sparse grass around the sandbox bristled with toy road graders and shovels, and as she crouched to square the unwieldy cover, the ball of her bare foot came down on a plastic army man. She picked the poor thing up, straightened his bent bayonet. My mother took little interest in our games, but I'd seen her pause, finger to lip, and watch my brothers swagger across the yard with their cap guns, hunting down Indians, robbers, Japs. Their cockiness was so pure, so untried. A boy's dangerous birthright.

My mother's nightgown stirred in the evening's first breeze, then settled gently against her thighs. Our neighborhood still didn't have streetlights, so even when she found herself at the end of the driveway, gazing at the neighbors' houses, it was dark.

That first night, while I lay hot and prickly in my bed, my little sister's adenoidal breathing grating my every nerve, my mother only ventured as far as the Woodsons' house, two doors up. The wishing well on their front lawn was the tackiest thing, but in the dappled dark it made her smile. When she looked down inside it she couldn't see the wads of bubblegum, the streaks of bird poop, or the sanitary napkin Michael Woodson had stolen on a dare to show his friends. In the dark she couldn't see the bottom at all, and she whispered, "Anybody home?"

In the morning, as my father dressed for work, careful not to wake my baby sister asleep on a cot wedged in the corner, he didn't notice the grass slivers pressed against the bottom of his wife's slender foot. That summer she'd taken to staying up even later than usual—he'd roll over at two, even three, and find the bed beside him still empty. When he got up for work, his head clear of whiskey, his natural optimism fully restocked, he'd watch her sleeping, her dark blonde hair spread across the pillow, and be astonished all over again at his luck. He'd won her over an ardent legion of suitors—we all knew the stories of one boyfriend being ushered out the back door as the next one rang the front bell. One night my mother informed my father she wouldn't see him any more, but in the morning when she opened the door she found him huddled on the doorstep, asleep, his head crushing a bouquet of roses. She stepped right over him, the thick Mick! Then he'd gone away to fight, and come back, bearing a Purple Heart but somehow more innocent than ever.

The untamed thing inside my mother still aroused him, because he still thought he'd caught it, like Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater. *Had a wife and couldn't keep her, put her in a pumpkin shell and there he found she kept quite well....* one of the nursery rhymes my baby sister begged me to read over and over till I thought I'd go insane.

In less than a month my boyfriend Dave was going away to college, yet every time he called he sounded anxious and out of breath, as if I were the one who might skip town. He lived only two blocks away, and I was his first girlfriend. He had a crew cut, and hairy knuckles.

Still, what would I do when he left? Being desired was my first addiction, and I spent all the time I wasn't with him working on being irresistible. I sewed myself halter tops and baby-doll dresses, sat in the sun with lemon pulp steaming on my long, straight hair. When I got dressed to go out with him, my two little sisters ran to fetch whatever I ordered—the eyelash curler or the cotton balls.

"Does he hold your face in his hands when he kisses you?" asked Katherine through *Now That's Pink* lips.

"That's for me to know and you to find out." I plucked my lipstick tube from her hand. Our mother had decorated the bathroom ice

blue, everything from the tub mat to the tissues to the plastic cup in its chrome holder.

“That’s what my boyfriend’s going to do.” Katherine puckered up for the mirror. “Then he’ll sweep me off my feet and carry me over the threshold.”

“That’s when you get married, goofball!”

Katherine was not deterred.

“So? I’ll marry him.”

“I’m marrying Daddy.” Deirdre, only three years old, perched on the edge of the tub drawing faces on her knee with my eyebrow pencil.

“Daddy!” Katherine howled. “You’re so stupid!”

Deirdre’s face crumpled and she tumbled backwards into the tub, knocking her head on the faucet. Her wail brought both my brothers running, jackknifing themselves into the melee.

“Oh my God.” This expression was considered sacrilegious in our family. I said it again, louder yet, all the while throwing my make-up into its bag. “God! There’s no privacy in this goddamn house!” I cried, rushing out into the hall. “I’m suffocating!”

My mother was in the kitchen, and I waited for her to charge in and demand where did I get that language, who did I think I was?

Who do you think you are?

But she didn’t appear. Deirdre glimpsed blood and howled to wake the dead. In the kitchen I discovered my mother staring out the window over the sink, potato in one hand and peeler in the other. She stared so intently I had to look too, but all I saw was the lawn furniture, the sagging swing, the sandbox. When she turned, her expression was confused and guilty, as if she’d just remembered something crucial, something she never in her life should have forgotten. She pushed past me, brandishing the slimy peeler.

“It’s not my fault,” I said. As if those words ever got you anywhere in that house.

That night Dave and I ate at Howard Johnson’s. He had a cheeseburger, the only thing he ever ordered, and I insisted that he try my fried clams but he wouldn’t, not the tiniest bite. Thinking I was flirting with him, he grabbed my wrist and took away the fork I was poking toward his face.

“Hey, watch it!” he laughed. “You’re armed and dangerous!”

I could see how that idea turned him on. I had a boyfriend as easy to read as one of Deirdre's picture books.

We drove the twisting, narrow roads to the town beach. The edges of the road grew soft and sandy; the night grew darker still. We lay on the scratchy army blanket he kept in his back seat. The sand was still warm, and the tide was coming in. The slap of the waves on the shore was the world's most insistent sound. I would never live by the sea, with its relentless demands: *look at me, listen to me*. My head nestled in the crook of Dave's arm as he spun me his dreams. I rolled over and started kissing him, the only sure way to get him to stop talking. I took his face between my palms and imagined him lifting me in his tanned arms and carrying me to a boat waiting at the edge of the sand. He rowed against the waves, his strong arms straining, seabirds we'd never seen before wheeling above our heads.

"I love you." It was the first time he'd told me. The first time any boy had told me, and the words pierced me like shafts of light between dark, rolling swells. "I love you."

No one had prepared me for how those words curl over you, pull you out to sea.

How many nights went by before my mother dared to enter anyone's house? Let's make it three, four at the most. She dressed purposely, in baggy black slacks, a black knit top. Shoes, this time—thin-soled sneakers that used to be mine.

No one locked doors—this went along with no sidewalks or streetlights, proof we'd left the city behind. The Gordons' back door swung politely open, inviting her in. Jack Gordon was in advertising and married to a Japanese woman we called Oriental. Their kitchen clock had stopped, and my mother, hand pressed to her racing heart, thought for a moment she'd stepped outside the boundary of time, too.

The heyday of cocktails, and the Gordons drank white wine. My mother found a jug in their refrigerator, poured herself a long-stemmed glass full. From the window over their sink she could just see her own clothesline, which my father had cemented into the ground, but which listed so badly she could only hang sheets on one side. My mother sipped her wine, leaning against the white porcelain sink exactly like hers. She plucked a brown leaf from the

African violet on the sill, blew dust from the pinch pot Billy Gordon had made in kindergarten.

There was a navy blue corduroy couch. Klee and Picasso prints on the walls. On a rickety shelf, beside a set of bongo drums, she discovered a copy of a sex manual. Unlike the pamphlet she and my father had received from the priest who married them, the book had illustrations, featuring a hairy man and big-breasted woman. My mother was dying to light one of the candles the Gordons had, candles stuck in Chianti bottles, but didn't dare, so she turned the pages in steamy semi-darkness, the couple swimming in and out of her vision, and saw things even the authors had never dreamed of. Once she lifted her eyes to find her own distant feet propped against a pillow, and read my name penned in ballpoint across the toe of my old sneakers.

The day she'd brought me home from the hospital, she laid me on her bed, on my back, and gingerly drew her finger down my middle, between the buds of breasts and across my round taut belly, all the way down to the dark pink folds so baffling to her. She had never looked at herself there. Her daughter was the map of her own secret, mysterious places.

My mother washed the Gordons' wine glass and put it back on the shelf where she, personally, preferred to store her spices.

My father brought home a bamboo flute he'd bought on his lunch hour. Someone was selling them on the street, he said, and he'd thought of me. *I don't know why*, he said, suddenly sheepish, *I just did*, and turned away to pour his first drink. The flute was all wrong in my hands—I already knew I'd never be able to coax a single note from it. The longing to be the daughter he imagined—poetic, ethereal, a saint on a hilltop—to prove him right, it nearly drowned me. I spent the night in my room, fumbling with the clumsy chunk of bamboo, and finally hid it away in the back of my closet.

Dave brought me red roses. He held them out to me in our narrow front hall, my sisters yipping at his heels like puppies. When I handed off the bouquet to Katherine, she glided away humming the wedding march.

As we sat on a bench in the hot August night eating ice cream, he told me there was a peeping Tom in the neighborhood.

“Mrs. DeMarco says a few people have spotted him, but he’s gone just like that.” Dave snapped his fingers.

“In our boring neighborhood? What’s to peep at?”

He slid a sweaty arm around my shoulders. “You have to make sure you close your curtains. Promise me.”

An unplayable flute, corny red roses—such bullying presents! Presents I had to pretend to want. Yet I didn’t really mind Dave trying to protect me. Who else was there to do it? As we lay on the beach that night I told myself that he’d be leaving in two weeks, and I’d be left all, all alone. The sky was thick with stars, crushed ice spilled on the side of the road. I saw one drop straight into the ocean.

My mother delivered all five of us by Caesarian section. Back then this meant an incision from navel to groin, so many stitches her belly became an embroidery sampler. When Deirdre was born I was twelve and stayed home from school for a week, because her incision would not stop bleeding. Deirdre was fat and pink and rarely cried. My mother lay in bed and wept for the both of them. I despised her weakness. I stood in the doorway of her room with my arms folded on my chest, demanding money to pay the bread man, reporting that the dryer had broken again. My father caught the 7:08 every morning, came home exhausted and penitent. He crept into the room where my mother huddled in their big mahogany bed, and she turned her face away from him. I picked marigolds and put them in a shot glass next to his dinner plate, to show I was on his side.

Everyone knew the Andersons had problems, but my mother was still startled to find a gun in their kitchen junk drawer. Chuck Anderson, a city policeman, worked a lot of overtime, so Ethel was often alone. Their son Bobby was always in trouble at school, and their daughter Renee went into hysterics if her clothes got dirty.

The Andersons’ kitchen was a disaster, and my mother had already straightened the slovenly piles of papers, screwed the cap back on the Coke bottle losing its fizz there on the counter. When she lifted the gun from its nest of rubber bands, coupons, and thumbtacks, it felt the way any well-made tool—a dependable can opener or seam ripper—did in her hands. The first thing she pointed it at was the stove.

The Andersons' living room was early American, a style she despised, those polished curlicues and that silly plaid upholstery. Ethel's less-than-clean nightgown was wadded in one corner of the sofa, and a clotted hair brush sat on the end table alongside several sticky glasses. My mother could just see Ethel, a bottle blonde, lying there half the day feeling sorry for herself.

"Bang," she said softly, echoing my brothers with their cap guns. Her little cowboys, swaggering with self-appointed duty. She felt more protective of them than she ever did of me or my sisters. Leaving her sons would wrench her in two.

Was the gun loaded? I'm thinking she was afraid to check.

The Andersons had a mirror, smudged of course, hanging in their hallway. My mother was a firm believer in practice, and she aimed the gun at the reflection over and over, till her arm got tired. Down the hall, that pill Renee whimpered in her sleep.

That evening, eddies of September swam on the dying summer air. Walking home my mother wrapped her arms around herself, goosebumps rising on her skin.

Less than a week before he left, I stood in Dave's bedroom, a replica of my own except for the sports pennants on the walls and the shiny footlocker gaping on the floor. His mother had begun filling it with new underwear and piles of thick sweaters and socks. His college was in North Dakota, or maybe South, I was always forgetting which. He wanted to be a veterinarian, and live out in the real country.

"I'm going to go crazy without you," he swore, drawing me down onto the bed which had, I still remember, a bumpy, royal blue spread.

"Take me with you."

He slid his hand up under my baby doll top. I tried to pretend we were in a remote cabin, where, ravenous with desire, he'd keep me locked away, his alone. He swore his parents wouldn't be home for another two hours, but I pretended someone—who would it be?—was about to barge in and drag me back—to where? Dave kissed the side of my neck, the same predictable place he always did.

"I mean it," I said, my panic real or self-induced—who could tell? "I'm small. I'd fit in your trunk."

"You love me, don't you?"

“Watch.”

I burrowed down among the woolens and cottons, their clean smell filling me with such homesickness, it really was as if I were the one leaving. Laughing uncertainly, Dave tried to pull me out, but I burrowed deeper, then reached up and pulled the lid over me.

“Hey.” He flipped it open. “You want to suffocate?”

He wrestled me out. He was strong, much stronger than he’d let me know, with hands that some day would tug calves and foals from reluctant wombs, and not tremble in the least as they stilled the hearts of suffering pets. He took charge of me, and this must have been what I’d longed for all along. How did he know, innocent as I supposed him, just where to touch me, and how to make me desire him to go on touching me there and kissing me here, never stopping? Beneath the royal blue spread he opened me out, he made me rise and bloom and fall away like a bud in a speeded-up film. A white rose, its petals flame-tipped—behind my closed eyes I saw it in black and white, just like on a Hallmark commercial.

Reckless, that was how I felt afterwards. Also safe, because of course Dave planned to marry me. I would be his vet assistant, at least till we had children. *How many do you want?* he asked. Reckless and safe at the same time—I was only sixteen.

At home, my own mother was reading in her corner of the couch. A black chiffon scarf netted her hair, and when she looked at me, I was sure she knew. I watched her beautiful face break into separate planes, a small, private earthquake of emotion.

“Look how grown-up you are.” She sounded stunned. “Before I know it, you’ll be gone.”

Married, she meant, in a snow-white gown. A vision that had made me deliriously happy only moments before suddenly infuriated me.

“That’s what you think! Who knows. Anything could happen.”

She closed her library book, its plastic cover crackling softly. “I’d never want to be young again. All those choices, yet never really believing you have any choice at all.”

I took a step closer. “Why not? Why didn’t you believe it?”

She ran her fingers over the wrinkled plastic, but it resisted smoothing. “Stupid? In too much of a hurry?” She reached for her cigarette. “Anyway, in the end you always have to make a choice. There’s no getting around that.”

“Not me. I won’t have to do anything. I’ll never do anything I don’t want to.”

And just who do you think you are? should have been her next line. A hundred answers danced, ready, on my tongue. Instead she drew on her cigarette, the scarf cupping the perfect oval of her face with its silky fingers. “It’s much easier to be old.”

“You’re not old!” Like a ball on a chain my loyalty swung back to her. “Mom, don’t say that.”

A half-smile. “Get to bed, sweetheart. You need your beauty sleep.”

Because of me, she was late getting out that night, and she dozed off, in one of the DeMarcos’ many chairs. In the pre-dawn coolness, she wore Estelle’s mink stole, which she’d found encased in a zippered bag in the hall closet. Tom DeMarco was an upholsterer—he’d sewn the slipcovers for both our living room chairs—and his house was like a furniture showroom, packed with samples and things people had never picked up. Estelle was fat and had a weakness for costume jewelry. An enormous rhinestone ring, left on the sill above the kitchen sink, swam on my mother’s finger.

How easy it would have been for her to slip a small token of each adventure in her pocket as she left! But her pleasure was the gliding in and out, the trying on and toying with. We won’t have her stealing. That would change everything.

A small, warm zephyr made her stir. The youngest DeMarco, barely two, stood beside her chair, breathing on her bare arm. He and my mother regarded each other with the respect any apparition deserves. This baby was famous in the neighborhood for his ability to scale his crib, to be found atop the dining room table or clinging to the top shelf of a bookcase. My mother strongly disapproved of how the lazy Estelle kept him on a baby leash on family outings, and now it gave her great pleasure to scoop him up and dangle him high overhead. Hoisting him onto her shoulders she rode him down the hallway, his laughter pealing all around her as if she were the tower and he the silver bell. Tom and Estelle slept in the basement, having surrendered the three bedrooms to their brood—there were six, maybe seven, children. The naughty baby crumpled my mother’s scarf in his hot fist. If she walked out the door with him, he wouldn’t mind. He might even be happier. Mothers fooled them-

selves into thinking they couldn't be replaced. It was all too possible a child could wind up with the wrong mother, that a woman who barely knew what she was doing could find herself with five of them. Nature was fallible—in her carelessness she could make terrible mistakes. My mother lowered the baby into her arms, fear gnawing her heart. The look on her face made the baby cry, and they touched foreheads, blubbing.

The sun's first rays were stealing in through the bedroom windows that were exactly as narrow and stingy as the ones in our house. While she changed his diaper, the baby chewed on his fist, and when she kissed his belly button he sighed and closed his dark eyes.

Did she leave a calling card? Tuck the mink stole over the sleeping boy, hide the gaudy ring in the sugar bowl? My mother hated show-offs. But when she saw the baby the next day, straining at his tether, and he lifted his arms and cried for her, causing Estelle to regard her strangely, my mother—never popular with other women—looked the portly, suspicious Estelle DeMarco straight in the eye and asked, "What have you heard about this prowler? Should we all start locking our doors?"

Getting caught must have occurred to her for the first time.

The idea of protection never occurred to me, and when Dave brought it up, our third time, the night before he left, as we wrestled one last time on the beach, where the wind plucked hard at our blanket and sand got between my teeth and in my ears and the sky held not a single star, the little foil packet he fumbled from his wallet mortified me. The moment he began to insist on it, because he loved me, because he couldn't let me take this risk, I understood what we were doing was nothing unique. Instead it was messily earthbound and potentially disastrous, and that's what being loved meant. That he had known this all along, and I hadn't, proved he truly was older and wiser, if unspeakably duller and more pathetic.

I lay on my back, pinned by this bolt. What an idiot I was. I searched the black chiffon sky for a single glint of light, while beside me Dave swore and tore the packet with his teeth and groaned as the rubber dropped into the sand. He had a spare—he'd be such a good, dependable doctor—but before he could open it I yanked my sweater over my head and lassoed him with it. Didn't he drop

that packet too, and surrender, let me pull his helpless head down between my breasts, and here I was, the strong one, stronger than either of us had ever guessed. The bristle of his chin, the velvet of his brow, his sweet breath and then his lips, and all the while my eyes searched the sky till it began to move, to expand, its weave growing looser, fraying at its center, undoing itself and flying into tatters, gorgeous slivered ribbons of silk. I held on tight, happier than I'd ever been in my life, because all of a sudden I knew this was only the beginning, not the end, only the beginning! I would never get caught! The stars tumbled out from that flimsy, rent scarf and he lay on top of me, spent and tender, my first boy, who wrote me love letters for weeks after he left for school, until he at last gave up.

Did he turn up on our doorstep at Thanksgiving, arms full of roses, and did my sister Katherine saucily inform him I had another boyfriend now? Did he spend the night huddled against the door, only to be discovered by my father, up early, brimming with unfounded optimism, who helped him to his feet and sent him on his way?

What is certain is that Ethel Anderson took a shot at the prowler that very night. Her husband was late, even later than usual, later than he had any goddamn excuse for being, and she found herself on her own front steps, a drink in one hand and his pistol in the other. How black that night was, you'd think someone had kidnapped the moon, held the stars for ransom! Ethel heard the soft thud of her empty glass when she tossed it into the grass. Beyond her overgrown shrubs, a boy's bike had keeled over dead on the grass; her mailbox was an armless dwarf.

Her husband had taught her to shoot the gun she held. In the basement, after the children were in bed. God, the stupid bushes were so high, anything could be lurking beyond them. Naked, the two of them. What would the neighborhood cows think if they'd seen her then? Ethel cradled the barrel of the pistol against her cheek. His short, powerful arms. His fist in the small of her back.

Out of the darkness came the distant whistle of the train on its way into the city. How many nights they'd sat together on the subway, thighs pressing, on their way to the crowds, the lights, dancing and drinks and afterwards the little fourth-floor place she'd had, so

tiny she'd hung her secretary blouses in the shower, and kept her shoes in the oven. Size five, before the children.

"Bang," whispered Ethel, though why in hell was she whispering, who in God's name was going to hear her, so she yelled it, catapulted the challenge into the sleeping street, and over there, on the Woidecks' front steps, a red alarm flared. A pinprick of flame, momentarily glowing very bright, then arcing through the blackness—afterwards Ethel remembered how graceful and terrifying it had looked, like a ballerina on fire.

"What do you think you're doing?" She stepped down into the grass, gun high, fearless. Fearless! Behind her, inside the house, her boy and girl slept the sleep of the innocent and helpless. The thought of their utter dependence galvanized her. A jittering current ran up through her thighs and into her belly. Ethel's heart pounded, her body throbbed with a mother's love, but beyond that the ferocious desire to nail something, preferably between the eyes.

"Don't try to run!"

Without his cigarette the prowler was harder to place, but Ethel thought she made out a figure scrambling to its feet. Striding across her own lawn she held the pistol the way her husband had taught her. If only he could see her now! Goddamn it, screw him, look at her, finger on the trigger, arm steady as a surgeon! Who needed him?

"Stop where you are!" It was all she could do not to squeeze the trigger. "Who do you think you are, breaking into our homes? Who the hell do you think you are?"

As if Ethel were the sorry fool everyone thought her, and the gun no more dangerous than her son's toy, the prowler ignored her, edging along the Woidecks' shrubs, trimmed within an inch of their lives, sending Ethel into such a fury she saw stars. Dazzled, her aim was off, and the bullet only splintered the corner of the door post, notching the wrought-iron number 9, and flew on to lodge, to the neighborhood children's delight, in an olive green shingle. Star-spattered and reeling, Ethel lost sight of her man. Poof. Vanished.

She took three more shots, just for the hell of it.

Dogs quit barking in the middle of the night, and the Goldilocks-like evidence—crumbs on a counter, mussed pillows—ceased. Some of the neighborhood women reconsidered Ethel, and she was

invited to bridge club. For two weeks she dined out on her story. But she didn't really know how to play bridge, and all they served was cookies and weak coffee, so she quit.

My mother was very good at bridge, but she dropped out of the club, too. No sooner was the prowler run out of town than the summer came to an end, abruptly, startlingly, the way it always did. The nights grew chilly, and no one played outside after supper. Mornings, after the school buses had rumbled away, the neighborhood felt scooped out and hollow, a husk without the fruit.

Let's have my mother and my baby sister wander down the street one morning, keeping close to the edge since there were no sidewalks, and let's have Deirdre's sweater buttoned wrong, since she'd insisted on doing it herself, and my mother with her cigarette, and her dark blonde hair newly cropped, to my father's sorrow. The sapling on each lawn has grown a little sturdier, and lined up like obedient students, they're all turning the same shade of red. Ethel can be checking for her mail, though it's still much too early, and she and my mother can fall into conversation, it doesn't matter how it begins. Before you know it my sister has a sugar donut and my mother a pair of hedge clippers, rusted but still operable, and Ethel is pretending interest in my mother's pruning demonstration. By now the sun is high and both women shrug off their jackets, and there she stands, my beautiful mother, still so young, the sun warming her shoulders and glinting, needle-like, in her shorn hair. Her capable hands. Her full, prim lips.

We could try and turn her and Ethel, those two renegades, into friends, but that would be forcing things. They were far too unlike.

Oh the things I've gotten away with in my life! The crazy risks, the insane hubris! While everything that possibly could, caught up with her. Another pregnancy, a horrible miscarriage. Katherine's many disastrous mistakes, every one of which my mother took to heart. My younger brother's drug problems. My father's fatal cirrhosis, the delirium she nursed him through. Her own heart disease, the surgeries, the love of smoking she could never give up, though her weakness filled her with self-hatred.

It was me—only me—who was with her when she died. Though she wore an oxygen mask, every morning I helped her put on her lipstick. The nurses all said how beautiful she still was, and when they heard me reading aloud to her, wanted to tell us about their

book clubs. *Too bad there wasn't a book club instead of a bridge club back then*, I said to her, but she just shook her head. By then she wasn't talking much. Her skin was so papery, the sheets hurt her, and fluid began to seep from her arms and legs. Still she went on, struggling for every breath, choking down every pill, her desire to live filling me with my own deep, terrible panic. The last thing she said before she fell unconscious, the last thing she said, her eyes widening, was, "Not yet!" As good as my imagination is, as much as I've tried for a happier ending, I've never been able to transform the terror I heard in her voice.

If only our paths had crossed, just once that summer! Why didn't I make that happen? Dave might have dropped me home and, restless and jangled and unsatisfied, I could have wandered down the street, only to spy her slipping across a lawn. She'd freeze, embarrassed, but after a moment she'd beckon, and I'd rush to her, her co-conspirator, her partner and sidekick. Together we'd break and enter, smiling but never exchanging a word, as if we'd planned it all along.

I'd dig through a refrigerator till I found a cheese she'd never tasted, and watch her eyes widen as she put it on her tongue. On a vanity shelf I'd discover an extravagant perfume she'd never buy herself, and urge her to massage it into her wrists. What wouldn't I give to have seen that, to have made that happen, for real?