Bocci · *Renée Manfredi*

"JESUS CHRIST is a blood clot in my leg," Ellen says. "Right here in my calf, the size of a quarter." She puts her foot up on the bench where her mother, Nina, is sitting in front of the mirror applying makeup. "Do you want to see it?"

"Not now," Nina says, shadowing her eyelids with purple.

Ellen sighs loudly. She is ten, an ordinary little girl whose imagination sometimes intersects inconveniently with truth; all of her imaginary friends die tragic deaths and she grieves for them as though they were real.

Ellen sits on the floor beside Nina. Her mother is pretty today. She is wearing earrings and perfume, which she almost never does.

"Mama—"

"How many times do I have to ask you not to call me 'Mama'? It's infantile."

Ellen pauses. "Mother, my carnation didn't come today."

"It didn't? Maybe your father has finally had enough of spoiling you rotten."

Teresa of Avila, "The Little Flower," is Ellen's favorite saint. Teresa levitated off the bed in her love of God and had visions like those Ellen herself has had: Michael the archangel has appeared to Ellen in dreams, called to her from the top of a white staircase. Until recently, Ellen would shake her head no when Michael held his arms open to her. But one night he sang so sweetly that she walked halfway up and he halfway down. Ellen sat in his white lap and he rocked her and looked at her with his great violet eyes that never blinked and told her that heaven was perfect, but lonely. When he touched her, Ellen felt as though all the light in the world was inside of her and when she awoke the next morning the sunlight seemed dim and she felt a heavy ache in her leg that beat like a heart.

Ellen's father, Sam, indulges her: every Saturday he has a white carnation delivered to the house for Ellen to wear as a corsage. All the nonsense about saints and angels is perfectly harmless, he said to Nina, and if a flower every week keeps her out of trouble and happy he'd gladly have them flown in from Brazil if he had to. "There are ten-year-old junkies," he reasoned to Nina. "There are ten-year-old children who hate their parents and run away and become prostitutes. Besides, it could be worse. She might be interested in Saint Francis and then she'd be asking for little peeps."

Ellen links her arm through Nina's. "Mother, last week in Sunday school Mrs. Del'Assandro said that when God is mad he puts out a contract on our lives. Jesus is the hit man. If blood clots move to your heart they can kill you."

"Mrs. Del'Assandro most certainly did not say that." Nina takes the bottle of perfume that Ellen is holding, says, "Clean your fingernails, Ellen, then go tell your father to come up and get dressed."

"Where are you going? Am I going?"

"No." Nina sprays a cotton ball with perfume and tucks it in her bra.

"Where are you going?"

"Just to the club for dinner and dancing."

"Then why can't I come?"

"No children tonight. Please go tell your father to come upstairs and get dressed."

Sometimes Ellen doesn't love her mother.

Ellen finds her father on the phone in his study. The room is cool, dark, though it is May and still afternoon. But her father is rich enough to have anything, even the night when he wants it and autumn air in spring. She sits on the desk in front of him, wraps the phone cord around her neck. "I am being hung in a public square! I am being persecuted for my belief in God!"

Sam swats her away, holds up a cautionary finger. She wanders about the room, picking up this and that, then shuts herself in the adjoining bathroom. She has been in here only a few times. The sunken tub is rimmed with candles, and beside it, a tangled pile of clothing. Some of Nina's makeup is scattered on the vanity and Ellen spritzes herself with perfume, dabs a little red on her lips. She lifts her long black hair off her neck the way she imagines a man might, and pretends the shiver at the nape is from a kiss so soft it is like a quiet she can feel. Something is different inside her; this whole day she has been restless, has felt something that is part like hunger, part thirst, and part like waiting for Christmas. She turns from the mirror when she hears from the tone of Sam's voice that he is nearing the end of his phone call. One of Nina's bras is hanging on the back of the door. Ellen holds it up to her chest, stands on the edge of the tub so she can see this part of herself in the mirror. The cups are as puckered and wrinkled as Grandma Chiradelli's mouth. If she ever has breasts this big, Ellen thinks, she will have them cut off; otherwise she wouldn't be able to sleep on her stomach at night. She puts the bra on her head, hooks the shoulder straps over her ears and fastens the hooks under her chin. This is how they look on Venus. All of the women on Venus have breasts on their head and are bald. All of the men are tall.

"Come out here, Elena," Sam calls to her now. She yanks the bra off her head and opens the door.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to come in here without knocking?"

"Mama sent me down to hurry you," Ellen says, and sits on his desk.

"Hurry me for what, pet?"

"Dinner and dancing at the club."

"Dancing? What dancing?"

She shrugs. "Mama says I can't go."

"Of course you can go. Are those your glad rags?" he says, looking down at her jeans and t-shirt.

She laughs. "I'll go and change."

"In a minute," Sam says. "Sit here with Papa for a while." He draws her onto his lap and she leans back against him.

"Papa, my carnation didn't come today."

"I know, Angel. Papa is fighting with the florist."

Sam strokes her hair, says, *"Bella. Bella,* Elena."

"Te amo, Papa."

"How much?" Sam whispers. "How much do you love me?"

Ellen answers out of ritual: "To the moon and back and twice around the world."

"For how long?"

"Forever and a single day."

It is nearing dusk when they get to the club, a sprawling, white-columned structure that the Italian Sons and Daughters of America bought from the township five years ago to use as a meeting place and family center. Sam, the vice-president of the ISDA since it was his money which imported the black and white marble and chandeliers from Sicily, had named it the May Club in honor of the spring birthdays of his wife and daughter. It has the requisite swimming pools, upstairs banquet rooms, gymnasiums and aerobics classes.

In the dining room Sam, Nina, and Ellen are given their usual window table that overlooks the bocci courts. Ellen likes to watch the players. Already the men are in their summer suits and fedoras. Ellen knows little of the game except that the brightly colored balls have to come close to the small white ball without touching it, and like church, the players must wear suits and ties.

"Stop. Stop that," Nina says, and puts a hand on Ellen's leg to still its swinging. "What's this?" She touches a bulge in Ellen's knee sock. Ellen pulls out a stack of religious tracts that she has taken from church, pamphlets with such titles as "The Road to Salvation," and "The Rewards of Piety." She carries them with her always and leaves them in restrooms wherever she happens to be. There are eight ladies' rooms in the club. Ellen has spent a good part of every dinner here visiting each of them twice: once to leave them, and a second time to see how many had been taken. She is sure Saint Teresa would have done the same.

"Haven't I told you about taking these things?" Nina says.

She has brought too many tonight; usually she carries just enough to lie smooth inside her sock. "Mrs. Del'Assandro told me I could have them. She says we should carry God wherever we go. Mrs. Del'Assandro says all God's angels would sleep next to me if they could."

"Mrs. Del'Assandro is a disturbed, unhappy woman." Nina holds out her hand for the tracts.

Ellen shakes her head, holds tight to them through her sock. "These keep the blood clot in one place."

"You make me tired, Ellen," Nina says.

"Everything makes you tired, Mama."

"Please," Sam says. "Let's have a nice meal tonight. Everybody pleasant and polite. If anybody is tempted to speak unkind words, chew ice cubes instead."

Ellen stuffs her mouth with three and crunches loudly.

Nina turns to Ellen, her face red. "Go. Go amuse yourself then if I'm so unbearable."

Ellen begins her usual tour of the restaurant, sitting down with strangers who most of the time neither welcome nor acknowledge her. Only once or twice has anybody complained and so Sam indulges her in this, too. The times he'd restrained her ended with Ellen ruining her mother's appetite to get back at him. Ellen frightens him a little. No one else can make him feel as she does. He spanked her once and promised himself and Nina never again. Ellen was four, too young to remember. She had done some small thing and when his threats had no effect, he spanked her. But the harder he hit her the more resolute she became in her refusal to cry. He had felt something beyond fury; it was as though she was mocking the impotence of his rage. It had ended with Ellen locking herself in the bathroom and Nina coming home to find Sam screaming crazy, threatening things about what he was going to do to Ellen when she came out: abandon her in a large, strange city where no one would ever find her. Nina had intervened and the next day Sam bought Ellen a pony. Thankfully, Ellen seems to remember nothing of this.

Ellen likes the darkness of the restaurant, the way the corners are so dim that unless she walks right up to the table the people are just shadows. She goes to the farthest corner where the aunts, Anna, Lena, and Lucia, usually are, the old, black-dressed women who do embroidery and talk of recipes and sorrow. And here they are tonight. Ellen sneaks up, crawls under their table and pretends she is Anne Frank, hiding from men who want to kill her. The veins in the old women's legs are maps for secret buried treasures. She sighs, draws her knees up. There is a nice breeze brushing across her cotton panties. All of the aunts wear the same thick black shoes with Catholic polish: shiny, but not glossy enough to reflect up when Sister Mary Margaret did a line check. Ellen knows which pair of shoes are Anna's. Anna always has her stockings rolled down around her ankles like sausage. Ellen loves Anna. After her papa and Grandma Chiradelli, she loves Anna best in the world. When Anna discovers Ellen under the table, her hands will reach for her, welcoming, as though it has been a thousand years since Anna last saw her and she will fold Ellen against her and her skin and clothes will smell like rubbing alcohol and lavender and grass. Anna is the only one who doesn't laugh or roll her eyes when Ellen tells her dreams of angels, and it is to Anna alone that Ellen has confessed her desire of becoming a nun or a saint.

There is dancing going on upstairs; Ellen hears the music of a tarantella, the stomping of feet.

"Wedding," one of the aunts says. "Sal Benedetti and Rosa, the last of Vito's daughters, God bless her." The other two murmur agreement and Ellen hears them put their forks down in order to cross themselves.

"Which one is Rosa?" Lucia says.

"The ugly one," Lena, the mean aunt, says. She once told Ellen she would go to hell for wearing so much jewelry and that in hell her necklaces and bracelets would turn into snakes.

"Lena, so what ugly? What's the difference when the lights are out?" Lucia says. "Rosa is a work of God but not his masterpiece."

"I had the most beautiful gown for my wedding night," Anna says.

"I also," Lena says. "The chair looked very nice in it. All that needlework my mother did on it, and for what? They all want you naked."

The aunts chuckle.

Ellen searches through her stack of pamphlets until she comes to the one with "La Pietà" on the front. She folds it into a tiny square and slips it beneath Anna's shoelaces. Anna will find it there later when she is undressing and say a prayer for her dead and for Ellen.

"I feel a little mouse at my feet," Anna says, and lifts the edge of the tablecloth to look at Ellen. Lena and Lucia peer down after her.

"Buena sera, Anna."

"Look the way she lies," Lena says. *"Putano.* Good girls don't lie in public with their legs spread like crickets."

"I'm not a good girl. I'm spirited and tiring."

"Si, spirito, e un valle di lacrime," Lena says.

"No speaka, no *capische,"* Ellen says and covers her ears, but she gets it anyway. *Spirited and tearful. A valley of tears.*

"Hopeless," Lena says, and continues eating.

"How is the future little novitiate?" Anna says, and hugs Ellen tight against her. "Oh, but it is good to see you."

Ellen whispers to Anna: "Something bad is going to happen to me, Anna. There is a blood clot in my leg from God. It might kill me. The next time you see me I might be dead."

"Why would God put a blood clot in your leg, dear?"

"He's mad at me."

"For what reason?" Anna says.

"He thinks I love Michael more than Him."

"Michael," Anna says dreamily.

Sometimes Anna drifts away when Ellen is speaking to her. Sometimes, Ellen thinks, Anna's head is stuffed with wet cinnamon that is hard like stone; words can't get past it. Grandma Chiradelli sometimes plays a game with Ellen to help her sleep: she makes Ellen imagine that her head is filled with cinnamon or sea water or night and then she says one word over and over and it makes changing patterns like a kaleidoscope: *Bella. Serenissima. Desolate.*

"Anna," Ellen whispers. "Help me, Anna. I don't feel good. I don't feel right."

"Papa seems to be searching for you, love," Lucia says.

Ellen looks up and sees Sam walking among the tables looking right and left. He might never find her. If she stays very still she is a shadow. She and the aunts are invisible as dreams.

When Sam turns back, Ellen goes up to him and he tells her it's time to eat.

Oh how Ellen hates peas! There are fifty-six of them. She arranges them into a circle in her flattened mashed potatoes. Now they are pills, like the pink ones her mother takes from a blue plastic case each morning. Ellen swallows them whole, one at a time, with water. When she takes them all she will be fifty-six days older. Inside each pea is a princess.

A man outside on the bocci lawn is smiling at her. Ellen has seen him several times before and he has never ignored her or given her mean looks. He is one of the players and though a little old—forty, Ellen guesses—he is very handsome. His eyes and hair are dark and he is tall. She watches. When it is his turn he throws the ball too hard and it knocks against the little white one. He looks over at Ellen again, smiling, and she dimples back.

"Who got married anyway?" Sam says, looking at two men in tuxedoes who have drifted outside to watch the bocci games.

"Vito Del Greco's daughter, Rosa, and Sal Benedetti," Nina says.

"Del Greco . . . with the six daughters?"

"That's right," Nina says. "They sit two rows ahead of us in church."

"Which one is Rosa?"

"The ugly one," Ellen says.

"Oh, yes," Sam says.

"Vito's wife is in my aerobics class. She said if we happened to be at the club tonight to stop in at the reception for a drink," Nina says.

"You said Mrs. Del Greco was a bitch," Ellen says.

Nina looks over at Ellen. "I most definitely did not say that."

"You said it last Saturday at the mall. You told Mrs. Genovese that Mrs. Del Greco was a ball-breaking bitch."

"I'd like to stop in and say hello," Nina says.

"No," Sam says.

"Why not?"

"Because I am fighting with Del Greco's pansy cousin, the florist."

"I insist," Nina says.

Ellen slips away while her parents argue to make her rounds in the ladies' rooms on the first floor and basement. She puts five or six tracts on the back of each toilet, a stack on the vanity, and slips one beneath each carefully folded towel. But she still has so many, even after leaving twice as many of them in all the usual places.

She pauses at the men's bathroom. Saint Teresa would probably do it. She puts her ear to the door and steals in when she doesn't hear anything. She stops and stares at the urinals. Planters, she guesses, except that there isn't any dirt inside. Artwork: standing back she sees that they are long faces, the jaws dropped down in shock, the mouths with little pools of water inside. They are her parishioners, lined up and waiting. She moistens the edge of the pamphlets in the mouths, sticks one to each forehead. She is a priest. It is Ash Wednesday.

Nina and Sam are still at their coffee when Ellen returns. And the bocci players have come in. They are at a corner table opposite the aunts. The player who had noticed Ellen earlier is looking and smiling at her now. She saunters over.

There are seven players including the smiling one, who is the only one paying her any attention; the others are discussing something intently in Italian. She slides into the booth next to the one who smiles, sits as close to him as she dares. He asks her name.

Usually she invents a name for herself when strangers ask, but there is something about this man that makes her give her real name, as though she believes he will know if she is lying. She says, "Elena Serafina Capalbo Chiradelli."

"Those are a lot of names."

"Papa says I'll grow into them. My confirmation name is going to be Teresa. Then I'll have five names. When I get married I'll have six and if I get married twice I'll have seven then when I die I'll need a big headstone."

"Very true," the man says.

Ellen searches his salad for olives.

"Is that your papa over there?"

Ellen looks up and sees Sam motioning for her. "No. I never saw him before in my life."

Sam walks over. "Come, Ellen. It's time for us to go."

"Home?"

"Upstairs to visit the wedding celebration, then home."

"No."

"Come, Ellen, don't make Papa angry."

"No."

"Just for half an hour. Be an angel." Sam reaches for her hand.

"No! No!"

"Have some work to do on this one, yes?" the man says. "Why not leave her here with me while you go upstairs? I'll be more than pleased to watch over her. We'll be here for hours yet."

Sam looks at Ellen. She smiles at him coyly, her eyes cutting around slowly to glance up at him. This is—was—Nina's expression, something he hasn't seen for at least ten years. Where did Ellen see it?

"You bought your car from us," the man says.

Sam looks from Ellen to the stranger. "What?"

"Your car. You bought it from us last year."

"Are you one of the Falconi brothers?"

The man nods.

"I'm afraid I don't remember you."

"Well, there are eight of us."

"Which are you?"

"Carlo."

"Carlo Falconi," Sam says, trying to stir his memory. "Well, it's a great car. Has never given me a minute's trouble, unlike certain little creatures." He winks at Ellen and she smiles so sweetly that it makes him heartsick. Sam turns to Nina. "Carlo Falconi," he says, but she is already moving away and heading toward the stairs. "Okay, then, I'll be back in a half an hour or so. Be sweet, Elena."

"Always, Papa."

Ellen takes ice cubes from a water glass and rubs them over her eyelids. "Ice reduces swelling. I have hemorrhoids."

"You're a strange little bird," he says, and laughs.

Ellen draws her knees up and spreads them, so her panties are showing.

From the dark corner across the room Ellen thinks she sees Lena's eyes flashing red and angry, Anna shaking her head, making the sign of the cross.

"What do you have there?" the man who calls himself Falconi says, pointing at her sock. She gives him the tracts. His eyes are so dark that when she looks in them she sees herself.

"'The Road to Salvation,'" he says and laughs. "But where do the wicked go after death?"

"To hell!"

"And what is hell?"

"The absence of God and an everlasting pit of fire." Ellen has been trained in all the correct responses.

"And how does one avoid the torments of this pit?"

"By not dying."

"Ha! Pretty good," he says, and slips the tracts into his pocket.

"You can't keep those!"

He smiles at her. "Says who?"

"Says me. Give me," she says, holding out her hand.

But now the men at the table are quarreling about something and Falconi looks away from her. They are speaking argument Italian, something she has heard between her grandparents; it's like ordinary talk, as far as Ellen understands, but words mean more because you repeat everything twice in a shout and point at people while you say them. She sighs, drapes her legs over one of Falconi's and lies back. He glances down at her, rubs his hand over her calf. But there is a terrible tenderness there and she jerks her leg away and puts her crossed feet up on the table.

There is a pause in the conversation. "My God, whose *enfant terrible?*" somebody says.

Falconi looks down at her with his black eyes, says, "Just a little elf that wandered my way."

If she listens closely enough, Ellen can hear the aunts talking in the opposite corner. Their voices are like the cool side of a pillow. She stares up at the ceiling. And here are the aunts now, swinging on the chandelier, back and forth, back and forth, arcing out wide and high and fast so that their hair and skirts blow back. Anna, her favorite, straddles the center chain, her legs straight out in front of her, Lena and Lucia hold onto the sides. They drop words rolled in olives into the salads, contradict everything the men say as they swing over the table. Now the aunts and the men are repeating a little rhyme Grandma Chiradelli made up:

The moon is made of Swiss.

The aunts say:

It's made of fontinella.

The men say:

The angels waltz in heaven.
They do a tarantella.

Falconi pushes Ellen's legs off of his and slides out of the booth.

"Hey. Where are you going?" She follows him down a hallway where a yellow light from the lamps on the dark red walls throws a shadow. This is the corridor that leads to the conference rooms. She rarely frequents the bathrooms on this side because people in the restaurant don't use them; she left a stack of pamphlets in the ladies' room once, and when she checked back two weeks later they were all still there.

Falconi is sitting on a bench around the corner, smoking a cigarette.

"Are you trailing me, love?"

"My booklets. I want my booklets back now."

He flicks his cigarette ash into a potted palm and pats the bench beside him. *"Bella,"* he says. "You are a beautiful young lady. Sit here with me for a while and I will give them back."

"Do you promise?"

He nods. "Come closer. Sit close to me as you were doing out there."

She hesitates, then does so.

"Give me a kiss, and I'll give you your booklets back."

"You said I only had to sit here."

He laughs. "If you give me a kiss, I will give you five dollars."

"On the lips?"

"Right here," he says, touching his cheek.

Ellen kisses him and holds out her hand. He gives her the bill and she puts it in her sock. Ellen lets him touch her hair, her arms, her waist, and now inside her panties. This feels good.

Then it feels better.

Any place he touches becomes warm, tingly. She feels relaxed as nighttime in her grandparents' house. Feels like she does when she is spending a weekend with them and falls asleep on purpose in the living room so somebody will have to carry her upstairs. Then it feels like she is floating and she always hears Grandma Chiradelli's heavy step and voice behind her directing the invisible arms that bear her to the bedroom with the dark furniture and cool air that smells like cooking and leather and laundry bleach.

She is as relaxed as that now. The man's hands make her feel so good that she thinks there must be a little piece of God in them. Her skin is like breath on a cold window: thin and warm and shifting. She is in the center of a circle that swirls blue then white then blue again, and it feels like he is making the colors inside her out of her own heartbeats: bubbles rising up white through black and his hand rubbing them into blue.

I am dying, Ellen thinks, because when there is no place inside her that doesn't feel good, the circle begins to break from the center out, like layer after layer of glass. Anna's face appears smiling before her, her head covered with a white night cap. Her lips move without sound: *Michael.*

But then it stops and her skin fits tight to her again.

"Elena, Elena, you make me so sad," Falconi whispers. He turns her face up to his. "I want to tell you something you won't understand now, but I want you to remember. More than anything in life I want to be a father. But my wife can't have children. This is the closest I will ever come to witnessing the birth of anything."

He stands, walks around the corner to the men's room. Ellen follows him in, right into the stall. He looks surprised, then says, "Oh, I suppose you want your booklets back."

She shakes her head. "I want more."

He laughs. "Go find Mama, little girl."

Ellen wraps her arms around his waist. "I think I love you."

He looks down at her and is silent for a few minutes. "You are not afraid of me?"

"No," Ellen says.

This time it doesn't feel good; everything about him seems suddenly too big, too heavy. She feels as though she is being made to swim too fast, that his arms, tight around her, are holding her underwater so she can't breathe.

"You're hurting me," Ellen says.

"Look up. Look up at the light."

She does so. Years from now it will be this light that she remembers in detail, a dingy yellow bulb through an opaque frosted cover around the edges of which are moths in various stages of decay, and it will seem to belong more to seedy urban hallways than it does here.

Her heart is racing like someone is chasing her. With one hand Falconi pins her arms behind her back, the other hand is down there, pulling at her underpants. She hears silver clinking, and for a moment thinks he is counting his change. But it is a belt buckle making that sound.

"Don't be afraid," he says. There is a sharp, unexpected pain and Ellen thinks: this must be what it feels like to have your fingernails torn off. She screams for Anna and he puts his hand over her mouth. She is a face on a chimney in a picture where you circle what doesn't belong. Nobody will find her for years and years. Her eyes and mouth are bricks that can't blink or speak. She might be here forever, staring at a light in the distance waiting for someone to look up and notice her.

But now she sees the faces of the aunts hovering around the light and knows from their expression that she is not going to die: they don't look surprised or frightened. Anna's face is ordinary and tired.

His body is still against her now. Ellen sits on the floor, and cries. The blood clot, instead of moving to her heart, is moving out of her.

"Elena," he says. "Elena, I want to tell you something." He pulls her to her feet. "I have never done this before. I have never hurt a child before. Do you believe me?"

She doesn't respond.

"I didn't mean to do this. I took advantage of you. I want you to say you can forgive me. Not now, perhaps, but someday."

She shakes her head. "I'm telling Papa. I am going to tell my papa."

He squeezes her face in his hand. "You mustn't. This has to be our secret."

"No," Ellen says.

"Sadly, if you tell your papa, I will kill him. I will shoot him tonight under a bridge. Do you want that? Do you want your papa to die because of you?"

Ellen cannot speak, is mute while he washes her face, combs her hair. "Your booklets," Falconi says, and puts them in her hand. "I want you to think of what happened as a game. Like bocci with our own rules. I know it doesn't seem so now, but in the long run that's all the importance it will have."

She stands by the sink a long time after he leaves. She is cold, feels as though she is dreaming and has to imagine her legs before they will work. She looks down at the tracts. Some angels look more real than others, some have wings that look stiff, made of plastic. It must be that some angels are not angels at all but ordinary men who bought their wings at Sears. God can't notice everything. Maybe some things are too tiny for him to see. Maybe he made children small because he doesn't like them. From heaven, she must look no bigger than an eyelash.

She puts the tracts in the garbage. What she wants more than anything in the world right now is a purple crayon so that she could write her name on every smooth surface she passes.

Anna is gone, the bocci players are gone, the tables all have new faces. Upstairs, the wedding guests are in a tarantella circle. Ellen weaves in and out of legs, bodies, trying to catch her father as he dances by.

Papa papa papa. But her voice can't reach him anymore than her hands can. Somebody steps on her feet. She sees Nina with her arm around Mr. Del Greco, and here is ugly Rosa with a big nose and a smile and too many teeth.

Then the music stops and Ellen feels hands reaching around her, a warm palm on her clammy forehead. She turns. Sam is smiling down at her and he seems to Ellen both too near and too far: as though his hand on her head weighs a thousand pounds but that if she called his name forever he wouldn't hear.

"You look worried," Sam says. "Did you have trouble finding us?"

She shakes her head.

"Did you see the bride? Too soon it will be your turn."

"Papa," Ellen starts.

"Yes? Why do you look like that?"

Ellen begins to cry.

"Elena, you're breaking my heart. Tell me."

"I can't," she says.

"Why? Has there ever been anything you couldn't tell me?" Sam strokes her hair and an image of herself with Nina's bra on her head—it seems so long ago now—flashes in her mind.

"You won't love me anymore if I tell you."

"That could never happen. Not in a million years."

"You will die if I tell you."

"I'll take my chances."

Ellen glances around. The room might be full of spies. "I know something," she says softly.

"What do you know?"

"God never wanted any children."

"How do you know that?"

"He killed his son. Jesus Christ is dead."

"Yes, but now he's in heaven," Sam says.

"He's in the men's room. He bled to death."

"Elena, Elena. Come now, dance with me like we always do," Sam says, and lifts her so her feet are on top of his. But even Sam's slow steps are painfully too wide. She feels a dragging pressure in her lower belly, her own blood stinging against the places where her skin is raw. Tonight before she goes to bed she will stuff her panties behind the water heater in the basement.

The band is playing a slow song and people hold each other close. Ellen sees Nina dance by with Mr. Del Greco who is saying something to her that makes her smile.

"I have good news," Sam says. "I have settled with the florist and your carnations will start coming again."

"No," Ellen says, looking up at the musicians on the stage.

"No?" Sam says.

"Those things," she says, pointing. "I want those things that man has by the drum."

"Cymbals? What do you want with cymbals?"

Ellen looks at him. "I have to whisper it."

Sam bends down.

"I want cymbals in case I get lost. I could just stand still and crash them and you will always be able to find me."

"Elena, all you have to do is call for me and I'll find you."

"But what if I have lost my voice too?"

Sam draws her closer and Ellen concentrates on the warm pressure of his hand, his feet beneath hers moving slowly to the music. It is this image of herself she is already beginning to remember, the firm steps that lead her around and around through the confused crowd as though to tell her, Here is where you find yourself.