The Lives of the Aunts · *Edith Pearlman*

I

SHORTLY BEFORE THE CRASH, Gussie Litwin moved into an apartment-hotel on lower Fifth. In a placid suite—rose-and-gray living room, rose-and-gray bedroom, and a kitchen that had begun life as a closet—she endured the Depression and the War. The War was over now, and Gussie was outlasting, or so she hoped, the New Look.

Though she had been a tenant for almost twenty years, she was not the Oldest Inhabitant. That title was shared by several gentlewomen who made their way towards the tea table every afternoon. Compared to those foamy-haired, diminished old ladies, Gussie with her dark bun and straight, square back was an *ingenue.*

But the *ingenue* had recently turned sixty-three: an age worthy of respect. In fact, Gussie was more than respected at the apartment hotel; she was liked, especially by the staff, who appreciated the generosity that spurted through her casing of old-world thrift. Though behind her door she sometimes yelled at visiting relatives, she was dignified in public. About her person clung the faint sweet odor of halvah. An ideal resident.

And so, when, on her arrival home early one December evening, an orange bounced out of her shopping bag and rolled under a lobby chair, the desk clerk immediately folded himself double to retrieve it.

"We'll have a mild Christmas," he remarked, holding out the rescued fruit.

"Please eat it yourself," she said, looking up at him. "It was headed your way."

"Kismet, Mrs. Litwin?"

Kiss whom? Bewilderment made her back stiffen further. "Fate," she corrected.

He didn't mind; her fifteen-dollar holiday gift had arrived just the night before.

An hour later, up in Gussie's apartment, the rest of her oranges were resting on the round table that occupied one corner of the living room. Cheeses had been thrust into the miniature refrigerator, and her second-best coat, the Persian, had been returned to the closet. Gussie was sitting

in a comfortable chair. Her fat, pinched feet just touched the carpet. She was turning the pages of a weekly news magazine, several months old.

Fashions that year were worldly—dramatic full skirts, cinched waists—but the favored face was a pious one. Ingrid Bergman had recently been canonized. Loretta Young had made the wimple's fortune. Gussie Litwin's wardrobe, however, remained suitable to a woman who went downtown to business. Her dress that evening was green, plain, and expensive. As for her dark little face, it was secular and vigilant. Nor had her apartment undergone any post-War transformation, except for the addition of even more photographs. They were everywhere, some framed in silver, some sliding out of albums, some tucked into mirrors.

Gussie read, ignoring the sound of traffic outside.

A stooped person noiselessly entered the apartment. She wore an undistinguished fur coat. Her nose was long and droopy, and her hair, a dyed red, straggled helplessly beneath a black hat. Gussie's sister: Ethelma.

Ethelma owned a key to Gussie's apartment and she had recently mastered the art of turning it without a sound. She stood by the door, triumphant. After a few moments, a soft belch gave her away.

"Who!" Gussie sat up straight, hand upon heart.

"Merry Christmas," said Ethelma.

"What?" Threatened by apostasy, Gussie covered her first hand with her second.

"You look like a saint," crowed Ethelma. "Anyway, that doorman wished me a Merry Christmas. Gimpel in the elevator likewise. I'm passing it along."

"I may not live until Christmas . . ."

"Eh!" Ethelma lifted her parrot's nose.

". . . if you keep sneaking in and terrifying."

"Terrify!" Ethelma beamed at the accusation. "Where did you get the oranges?"

"Help yourself," said Gussie.

Ethelma sat down at the round table without troubling to remove coat or hat. Gussie slipped her magazine under a pile of other magazines and took up a book.

"What are you reading?" Ethelma asked.

"The Big Fisherman."

"That's a work! One thing I know: Gentiles make gorgeous martyrs. I saw Greta Garbo today."

Gussie said, not lifting her eyes, "Again?"

"Again. On Seventh."

Now Gussie did look up. "Seventh? It must have been Fifth."

"One thing I know: New York streets."

"Be sensible. What would Greta Garbo be doing on Seventh Avenue?"

Ethelma said, slurping, "She didn't mention."

"And how did *she* look?" asked Gussie, with a meaningful glare.

". . . attractive. She likes to walk, just like me."

"You need a hobby, Tem."

Ethelma attempted to straighten her round shoulders. "I have numerous hobbies. Just because I don't play mah jong . . ."

Gussie said, more tenderly, "I know. But with a daughter married and a husband working, a person requires . . . something to keep her occupied."

"I am extraordinarily occupied," said Ethelma, getting busy stacking the orange peels. "In the mornings I clean my apartment. Then I read, for several hours. At two o'clock I take a cup of soup. And then . . ."

"And then?" Gussie's dark face was curious.

"And then I prowl Manhattan." Ethelma's green eyes bulged. "Like a . . . sleuth!"

Gussie sighed. "I mean a real hobby. Knitting?"

"Knitting! For Englishwomen. My name is not Miniver."

"Charity, then."

"I am already bountiful."

"Old coins," said Gussie recklessly. "Anyway, stop following Greta Garbo."

"Garbo follows me!"

Brown eyes met green. Each endured the other's discourteous glower until there came the sound of a key scraping the lock. Then, faces all at once composed, the two women sat still and watched the door handle jiggle.

At last their sister Sophie stood before them—a tall, thin, almost gawky person of fifty-four. Her wide mouth twitched secretively. Her lipstick was the color of wine.

"What a clatter," said Ethelma.

"You'll wake the dead," said Gussie.

Ethelma said, "The seal is perfect with that suit." Still seated, she managed to free her arms from her own coat, revealing a sour gabardine dress.

"What's that green stick?" demanded Gussie.

"My new umbrella!" said Sophie, lifting it as if in victory.

But Gussie had turned again to her book and Ethelma was helping herself to another orange. Sophie put down the umbrella and hung up her fur jacket. Then she walked around the room. She examined but did not taste the candies in the various dishes. She looked at a few of the photographs, and straightened a pile of books. From time to time she touched her silk turban with long fingers. Below the turban was a neat roll of hair, henna, like Ethelma's. Sophie's eyes also resembled Ethelma's: large, pale, protruberant.

"Sit down," said Gussie. "You're driving me crazy."

"Don't we have to go?" said Sophie. "I sit all day." But she obeyed, choosing the sofa, and lit a cigarette.

"You smoke too much," said Ethelma from the table. "Do you smoke at work?"

"All the time," said Sophie, exhaling.

Gussie said to Sophie, "How's the weather?"

At the same time, Sophie said to Ethelma, "How's your sore toe?"

Ethelma said, "I should think, Gus, with your income . . ."

Gussie interrupted, "What sore toe?"

"Christmassy," said Sophie. "That is to say, glittery. But not too cold."

"My toe is nothing," said Ethelma. "One thing I know: there's dust on this table. Your maid has cataracts?"

"Nothing?"

"It may snow, however," continued Sophie. "At the office this afternoon . . ."

"Where will Carla sleep?" asked Ethelma.

"On the couch, as always," said Gussie. "She's thirteen. Can you credit that? I remember her mother at thirteen."

"I remember you at thirteen," said Ethelma. "What does it signify? Besides, Carla is fourteen."

"Thirteen," insisted Gussie.

"At any rate, pubic," said Sophie.

Gussie said, "Her mother writes that she's interested in Catholicism, has a devout friend, thinking of becoming a nun."

"Who is? Carla?" said Sophie, alarmed.

"No, the friend. Some Irish girl," snorted Gussie. "But Carla pays attention. Intrigued."

Sophie said, with compassion, "Those beautiful habits."

"Not the clothes," said Ethelma scornfully. "The white pallet without stain. *Pura et incontaminata.* It's time to go."

"They hurt their bodies, those novices," said Gussie.

"They fillet themselves," said Sophie.

"With whips," said Gussie, shuddering. "We've got half an hour."

Ethelma said, "Grand Central will be altogether sardines."

"Stop worrying." Nevertheless Gussie got up and put on her coat, and her sisters did likewise. They did not slip lightly into their furs, but robed themselves with respect. Then they stood still for a moment, like recipients of honorary degrees—short Gussie, round-shouldered Ethelma, rangy Sophie. Suddenly all three spoke at once.

Ethelma said, "I hope we get a cab."

Sophie said, "We'll never get a cab."

Gussie said, "Turn off the lights."

Sophie switched off a lamp and opened the door. Gussie switched off the other two lamps and butted Sophie through the doorway.

"Leave one burning," said Ethelma. "Darkness is Gehenna."

II

A few years earlier the train to New York had been loaded with servicemen. The next year there were fewer, then fewer still. Now, the year of the New Look, Carla couldn't find a single one. She missed them: the tired courteous officers with gold above their visors, the grinning sailors in blue. She wished she hadn't been a child during the War, wished she'd been old enough to serve as a nurse's aide in a starched cap. Her Great Aunt Sophie had gone to work in a West Side U.S.O. Three times a week Sophie had played cards with the boys. Carla could imagine her at the card table, her legs as long as the soldiers', wisecracking, smoking . . . The train shuddered, then stopped. Carla looked out of the window. New London.

"Who will meet us?" she inquired of her mother.

"Aunt Gussie for sure. Remember to mention that you saw her in *Time.*"

"I will. Who else?"

"Aunt Sophie, probably. Please don't ask why her hair is so red."

"I'm not an infant. The Bronx aunts?"

"Rose and Minnie? Probably not. Maybe Aunt Ethelma. Ask after her daughter. Ah, Ethelma."

"Want to play gin?"

"Sure." Carla's mother found the cards in her handbag. They used *Vogue* as a table. Slap, slap. Carla eagerly picked up her hand. To find yourself with a run before drawing was a thrill: the meld donné, her father called it . . .

"Guess who taught me gin," said Carla's mother.

"The aunts," said Carla without much trouble.

The train started. "That's right. The aunts."

"All five of them together?"

"Ethelma and Sophie, mostly. All one Bensonhurst summer, we played and played. Also we . . ."

"Saving hearts, are you?" murmured Carla.

"Who knows? *You* don't need this Jack."

"Oh, I do." She discarded.

"Gin," said her mother, glowing.

They played until New Haven, then had dinner. The train sped through the night. After Bridgeport, Carla's mother settled back in her chair with the magazine. Carla decided not to read. *Stories of the Saints* was in the suitcase just above her head, but if she dug it out her mother's eyes would turn carefully neutral, and her lips would noticeably avoid mentioning some upcoming bar mitzvah. What a strain. So Carla looked out of the window instead.

A few well-dressed families got on in Stamford. Then there were no houses, only lights in the distance. The girl dozed. Suddenly they were at 125th Street. She sat up straight. Here, elevated, she could glimpse other people's lives. The other people were lofty too. In a fifth floor apartment, a man and woman, facing each other, were eating. What were they confessing? Personal disclosures were made over food; this Carla knew from experience.

The train left Harlem behind. Travelers stood up and tugged at suitcases. Carla's mother's face still raptly shone. Carla nudged her. More people stood up, shook themselves, grabbed for bundles. The air seemed as thick as paste.

The train stopped.

Carla and her mother were extruded from the car.

"Your coat," wailed Carla's mother.

"I have everything."

Like pilgrims climbing a mountain, the passengers moved slowly up a ramp. Ahead was light: the waiting room of Grand Central. They moved a little faster, and Carla saw an enormous crowd behind a rope. At the front of the crowd stood three of her mother's aunts, like dignitaries at a funeral.

They were motionless. All three wore fur coats. The tallest, Aunt Sophie, wore a turban. Ethelma wore a black hat. The third, short Aunt Gussie, her face as dark as a Turk's, wore no hat.

Carla's mother waved. "That unspeakable beaver," she grumbled. "Can't the cousin do better for her? Still, you are not too young, I maintain. Where's your suitcase?"

"I gave it to a mendicant. Whatever are you talking about?"

"Ha!"

They were urged along another inch. The aunts now peered forward anxiously, and gazed right through them. The mob labored forward. Aunt Gussie saw them. She waved and called. There was a final spasm, and Carla and her mother were delivered into the waiting room.

Carla flung herself upon her relatives. Nearby, her mother's pale face bobbed up and down among the swarthy.

"You're staying a week."

"You're staying forever!"

"Honey. Gorgeous."

"Sweet thirteen."

"Fourteen," Carla tried to say, but animal hair tickled her nose.

"Taller, thinner . . . a dead ringer for Sharman Douglas."

"What haven't we planned?"

"Radio City?" said Aunt Sophie to Carla.

"I'd love . . . South Pacific?"

"You wrote for tickets last June?" asked Aunt Ethelma.

". . . no."

"Greenhorn!" Affectionately.

"We'll see what we can do," promised Aunt Gussie.

"They are all well?" inquired Aunt Ethelma. Meaning Carla's father and young brothers, left at home.

Carla's mother nodded, beaming. Then they took themselves off. Aunts, niece, and great-niece rolled murderously through the crowd.

Forty-second Street was a mess, but Aunt Gussie with mysterious authority got them a cab. Carla and her mother took the pop-up seats. The cab headed south.

"You've eaten?"

"We've eaten."

"You'll eat again."

The cab smelled of cold fur. They hurtled past stone buildings. Eighth Street, glimpsed sideways, was aglow. They piled out.

And now Carla, staring up at the complicated face of Aunt Gussie's apartment hotel, felt that this year's visit had properly begun. She drew a breath. What was worldliness if not this corner?—an Avenue whose name alone meant style, a cross street dense with bookstores, brownstones, University delicatessens. Washington Square was spread out half a block away.

The heavenly city! And for guides she had these three sophisticated women. Women who, in their progress from the lower East to the Bronx and back again to Manhattan had proved themselves thorough New Yorkers. Sage women, though possessed of spotty educations. Not one had been to college. But Gussie and Sophie were faster than adding machines, and Ethelma remembered every word of her high school Latin.

They were pushing her towards the canopy. They were conveying her into the building. Carla halted. Just outside the door, in a tub, was a lit-up Christmas tree, Druidic in origin. Carla would have liked to walk around to the next block, where there was a church . . .

"Walk? Alone? At night?"

"Never mind," she said, immediately but too late. They had surrounded her like leukocytes.

Sophie said, "The temperature is dropping like flies."

"One thing I know," said Ethelma. "Crazy people prowl."

"Even not so crazy," said Aunt Gussie.

"On the subway, once . . ." began Sophie.

"Don't mention it!" said Ethelma.

"I will never walk alone at night," promised Carla.

Aunt Gussie provided forgiveness. "Upstairs we have fruit," she said kindly. "And cheese."

She led the way, short as a shrimp, past a doorman who greeted her by name, past the desk clerk ("How the young miss has grown!"), past elderly ladies. Though an elevator boy ran the wheel, Gussie was captain. They ascended without mishap. Gussie marched down the hall. Her family trailed after her into her apartment where a single lamp votively burned.

"Close the door, Carla."

Carla obeyed. Everybody sighed. A light went on over a round table with a fruit bowl in its center. The fur coats were escorted into the closet. Some more lamps went on. The bathroom got used.

"We must talk *instanter,*" said Ethelma with glee. She stood at the round table and nudged Carla's mother into a chair. Sophie joined them. Carla's mother was allowed to select fruit first. She bent forward and the light caught her smooth hair and her schoolgirl's gold barette. Then she leaned back again, and hat and turban collided over the bowl.

Aunt Gussie chose the other corner of the room, near the window. Carla stood beside her chair and parted the blinds with her fingers. Across the street, through the windows of an apartment building, she could see holiday parties. Five floors below a few couples were hurrying towards Washington Square. Off to the south, unseen, the Village throbbed with art and passion. There in the Village, Carla, if she remained Jewish, would one day live impurely.

She sat down on the hassock near Aunt Gussie's feet.

"Well," said the aunt.

"Well," said the niece.

"Did you see me in *Time?*"

"I did see you in *Time,*" said Carla. "The business section."

"It was not significant. Lots of insurance women have been appointed to managerial positions."

"None as high as yours," said Carla.

"True," said Aunt Gussie, lamenting her inferiors.

The telephone rang. Aunt Gussie didn't move.

"Shall I . . . ?"

"They'll take it downstairs. People call back."

"Mother says you have a million friends."

"At least." Her pasha's eyes grew reflective. The telephone stopped ringing.

At the table across the room the three other women were laughing.

Sophie and Ethelma had taken off their hats. Their scalps shone under insufficient reddish hair. Aunt Gussie sighed the sigh of a woman whose daughters are without dowries. Carla reminded herself that Aunt Gussie had had no daughters; only, long ago, a baby, male, now dead.

"You went to Europe," Carla said. "How was it?"

The telephone rang again. Aunt Gussie said, "When you think that for sixty-three years I was hardly out of New York."

Her apartment held the mementos of those years. Carla knew all the pictures by heart. There was Aunt Gussie's late husband, in a straw hat. The baby, taken a week before he grew ill. Carla's grandmother, the oldest of the sisters, who at seventeen had emigrated to Chelsea, Mass. In the pictures the six sisters combined and recombined—having picnics, swimming, marrying each other off. Now there was a new photograph, courtesy of *Time.*

Carla returned her gaze to her great-aunt. "What was best in Europe?"

Aunt Gussie waited for the telephone, ringing again, to cease. "Rome," she said. "Though there is misery still, in Rome."

"Did you see the Pope on his porch?"

"I met him inside. We played casino."

"I'd love to go to Italy."

"Oh? Come with me, next time."

"What? What?" called Carla's mother.

"Gus, there's that telephone again," said Sophie. "Give them a break."

Gussie got up to answer it. Sophie walked over to Carla. She grabbed Carla's hair, twisted it into a topknot, and surveyed her work at arm's length, holding the girl's head like a coconut. Then she shook her own head, and let go.

Aunt Ethelma had moved to the couch. She was eating apricots. Carla's mother was stretching like a starlet. Aunt Gussie put down the telephone and opened the closet and wrote something on a calendar that hung on the door, protecting the coats. Then she sat down again and took off her shoes. Her feet made room for themselves beside Carla on the hassock.

Carla ran a finger along one brown sole. "Tell me the secret of your success."

"This Gussie," yelled Ethelma through a brilliant mouthful, "is only the smartest human being in the insurance business."

"In one month alone, she wrote a million dollars," explained Sophie from the window.

"Not quite," said Aunt Gussie. "Carla, your mother was the prettiest girl who ever visited Jerome Avenue."

Carla's mother laughed. "I didn't have an ounce of sense."

"You were a terrific noodle," Ethelma agreed.

Sophie said, "The same month your Aunt Gussie wrote all that insurance, she sold her fur hat to your Aunt Minnie. For fifty cents."

"The caracul?" asked Carla's mother. "But why? I would have made it into a muff. For Carla."

"Carla *is* growing up," Aunt Gussie agreed.

Four pairs of eyes were on her. Carla flushed.

"One thing I know," said Ethelma. "It's time for bed."

"That darn phone," said Sophie.

Aunt Gussie and Carla made up the couch. Carla's mother loafed in her chair. Sophie adjusted her turban with the help of the mirror. Ethelma clamped on her own hat unaided. Ethelma kissed the visitors. Sophie refrained. "Good-bye, good-bye." Then they were gone.

Aunt Gussie went into the bedroom. Carla's mother dawdled after her, and forgot to say good night to Carla. But Aunt Gussie didn't forget. It was her face that Carla saw just before she fell asleep. The right-angled brow bent towards hers. "Good night, darling."

Darling! What had been lost to Carla's generation when her parents abandoned the darling of their parents? So what if it was not reliably refined; so what if it sometimes ended in *k*? Because of a fault or two, a worthy word had been dismissed. Carla's mother called her Dear; the vocable of a Nanny. Darling! Heart of my heart, Liebchen, beloved. "Aunt Gussie," murmured the girl. She trusted that, if she did not convert and enter an order, a man would one day bend richly over her. Would he too have syrupy eyes? "Aunt Gussie, darling, good night."

III

Carla knew a few things about Aunt Sophie. Like her namesake the Saint she had brought up three girls. They were the daughters of her husband, a bald widower, whom she had married late in her thirties. But whereas Santa Sophia's daughters had been martyred—their breasts torn off, their bodies stabbed with white-hot augurs—Aunt Sophie's daughters had gotten married. Aunt Sophie had then gone back to work. She was a book-

keeper for a jewelry firm, and spent her salary on clothes.

Today Sophie was wearing a moss-green suit. She had arrived at Aunt Gussie's apartment at noon in her fur jacket, but the weather was unseasonably warm, and now she was carrying the jacket, as well as an alligator umbrella. Next to her, Carla's mother in a wide skirt looked like a fugitive from boarding school. Walking several yards behind them, Carla gaped at the buildings.

Aunt Sophie turned. Today's hat had a brim. "Young lady!"

"I won't get lost," Carla called. Though she might be kidnapped. The thief could stand behind some pole and grab her as she meandered by. Then he'd run. But how the aunts would charge! Surely Aunt Gussie had written insurance for the Mayor. One person Aunt Ethelma knew: the chief of police. As for Sophie, she would tear around the city on a clothing rack.

In fact, nobody wanted to steal Carla. The Christmas spirit prevailed. On every corner Santas rang bells for charity. In store windows seraphim consorted with reindeer. The atmosphere on Fifth Avenue was cheerful, though not holy.

The two women ahead had turned onto a side street. The girl caught up with them in front of a steamy and crowded lunchroom. They entered. "All females," Carla said to her mother. "In hats. Eating chicken."

"Galliverous," said her mother, unnecessarily radiant.

The waitresses were short, scanty women taking up very little room.

"Were they chosen for their size?" wondered Carla.

"I don't know," said Sophie. She led them to a table near the kitchen. A door with a porthole swung open every few minutes, so that a tiny serving girl, under a laden tray, could pop out backwards.

Carla studied her aunt while her aunt studied the menu. The hat concealed her slight baldness. Her suit made her prominent eyes all the greener. For the rest: a long, gleaming nose, and the wide, empurpled mouth, adept at grimaces.

Carla said, "Aunt Sophie, Joan Crawford has nothing on you."

"What'll it be, girls?" The miniature waitress hadn't slept for days.

Aunt Sophie suggested croquettes.

Carla agreed. Carla's mother ordered a child's meal: frankfurt and milkshake. The waitress disappeared. Aunt Sophie lit a cigarette, her eyes lowered like a reporter's.

The waitress speedily returned, bearing their food. They devoured it in ten minutes. All around them hatted women were similarly stuffing. A belch was as necessary as an amen.

"This is a nice place," said Carla.

"I'm glad you like it," said her great-aunt.

"My hot dog was without merit," smiled Carla's mother.

"Frankfurts are not the specialty."

". . . but the milkshake was wonderful. And the pickle . . ."

"Where shall we go?" Sophie asked Carla. "The zoo, like last year?"

"Don't you have to go back to work?"

"I took the afternoon off. To show you around."

"Saint Patrick's?" said Carla.

"Dead in the afternoon. Let's go to the Metropolitan."

"I have an appointment," murmured Carla's mother. A few minutes later, back on the sidewalk, she awarded them two not quite audible words and slipped away. Aunt Sophie, by adjusting her hat brim, summoned a cab.

Thus it was with this elongated escort that Carla visited the Metropolitan for the first time. Sophie hadn't been here for years, she confided as she took Carla's arm, not since her husband's daughters were young. "The girls loved pictures. They could stand for hours in front of a . . . Rubens. The painter, not the sandwich."

Sophie and Carla wandered like good children from room to room. "Beautiful," lamented Sophie every so often, breathing down the length of her nose. Her elastic face seemed melancholy. Was she mourning those by-gone afternoons of step-motherhood? Wouldn't she rather have been sprawled in a sister's apartment, smoking and arguing? Wouldn't the girls rather have been home with cards and the radio? Yet they had come here, all four—Aunt Sophie of the twitching nose, her three wan charges—and had paused in front of some Madonna. The girls had stared. Aunt Sophie had sighed, envying the milky bosom, the useful womb.

Now Aunt Sophie paused before a Venus and Adonis who were leaning amorously towards each other in the middle of the woods. Their clothes were falling off unaided. Their dogs looked the other way.

Aunt Sophie's mouth worked, but she said nothing. Carla moved sideways, and addressed herself to a Dutch Mary placidly admiring her Child.

Saint Catherine had dropped in. The women looked suprasensible. The Saint had pearls in her hair.

Carla returned to her aunt and rubbed her cheek against a soft arm. "Aunt Sophie, Aunt Sophie."

"What, Carla?"

"What's it like, being an adventuress?"

Aunt Sophie looked first startled, then reminiscent. But: "Ask your mother" was all she'd say.

They had tea at the Museum: more ladies with hats. Afterwards Sophie put Carla in a cab and gave the driver Gussie's address, as if Carla were mute. Bending down to say good-bye she saw and then mimicked her niece's hurt look, then reached a long arm in through the window to bestow an affectionate pinch on the girl's cheek. Carla leaned back happily against a seat that smelled like a cigar.

It was almost five when she reached Aunt Gussie's apartment. Aunt Gussie hadn't yet returned, nor had Carla's mother.

She found the cards in their usual drawer. Kneeling, she laid them out on the rug. Black on red, red on black. When Aunt Ethelma phoned in at the usual six o'clock (Rose made her telephone rounds at eight, Gussie hers at ten-thirty), Carla had won several games.

"Where's your mother?" asked Aunt Ethelma without preliminaries.

"Still shopping, I guess. How are you?"

"You're alone!"

"Just me and the murderer," said Carla, and puffed on her cigarette.

Came the shriek she expected. "You're smoking!"

"I'm allowed."

"Put it out this minute. How was lunch? What did you have?"

"Croquettes."

"She took you there? Some spender. Everything she makes goes on her back. Have a wonderful time at South Pacific, toots. The treat of the century."

Maybe. Sassy Ensign Forbush left Carla unmoved. But when Bloody Mary delivered her daughter to the young Lieutenant, she wept.

IV

The next day Ethelma's daughter took time out from graduate courses to take Carla to an early afternoon movie. Then Carla made her own way to Wall Street. Aunt Gussie gave her a tour of the insurance firm. In one room middle-aged women had commerce with heavy machines. "Posting," said Aunt Gussie. In another, young typists played their more conventional instruments. Their tulip nails remained miraculously intact. A man in a vest passed through, on the double.

Aunt Gussie, like the other executives, occupied a private carpeted cubicle with a window onto the Street. It was quiet here. Gussie sat down at her desk to read a report. Carla sat on the red visitor's chair. Through the kneehole of the desk she saw Aunt Gussie's shoes dislodge each other, revealing blackened hose. One large toe scratched the arch of the other foot. The pages turned; the eyebrows met; Saint Teresa herself might have been sitting there, practical, visionary, discalced . . .

"That's done," said Gussie after ten minutes. "Well, what do you think of it?"

"This room?" Carla searched for the right phrase. "It seems so . . . successful. So high up."

"Oh, that's not important," beamed Aunt Gussie. She found her coat in the closet, and motioned Carla to precede her.

They said good night to Aunt Gussie's secretary and to the typing pool. A Christmas tree, heavily decorated, stood in the reception area. "Y'all," said a golden receptionist to Carla, nice and friendly. "Ma'am," to Gussie, with respect.

The elevator picked them up. Pressed between two sleek men Gus the Executive became the Gussie Carla knew: small, aging, never quite clean . . . The elevator glided downwards. Aunt and niece were close enough to fuse. Conversation was essential.

"Lot's going on up there," Carla said.

"Much of it seems senseless," said Aunt Gussie. "Forms, books, tables. It's Byzantine, I'm told. Herring salad, says Ethelma. Yet . . . necessary."

"Absolutely," Carla reassured her.

The elevator stopped. They fell into the lobby, and risked their lives in a revolving door.

Yesterday's mild weather was gone. Aunt Gussie took Carla's arm, and they walked into a howling wind, bending forward like everybody else.

"Your mother worked in an office," Gussie said loudly.

"I know. She must have made a hash of things."

"Not at all. She was efficient."

"Mom? Never. Too easily confused. Too ready to worry."

"Don't fool yourself," shouted Gussie. "She loved it." Down the subway stairs they clattered, Aunt Gussie keeping up a good pace. "Well, business isn't for everybody. No, no, Carla, I have tokens. Though you are very good in math, they tell me. You'll need that. Don't lean against that filthy post. Actuarial work takes a head for figures. The insurance business needs getting used to. Maybe some summer . . ."

"It was awfully nice to see your office," said Carla. "You seem so . . . absorbed."

"Oh, honey, it's just a living," said Aunt Gussie shyly, revealing that it was nothing more nor less than a life.

V

As a child Carla had felt that the Aunts of the Bronx, Rose and Minnie, lived in a luxurious style. This impression was caused by two things: the brown plush of the living room sofa, and the fact that dinner at their apartment was always a feast. There was a bowl of soup (a single stuffed cabbage in an odorous pond); there was brisket with numerous vegetables; there was kasha, compote, and cake. Always glass dishes and fresh bread and a sip of sweet wine. "In honor of our guests," Aunt Rose would toast, her mouth as straight as a playing card. Aunt Rose's husband would then bestow a timid smile upon Carla's mother.

Aunt Minnie, who had no husband, worked in a government office. She had red veiny cheeks and a permanent smile. At the table she usually delivered a piece of romantic gossip, often concerning Ali Khan. Then the conversation would return to health, money, and relatives. This season's favorite relative was a Brooklyn cousin, a former nogoodnik now making a million in the fur business. It was he who had supplied them all with their coats, each according to her rank.

At the end of the main course, Carla asked to learn something new. A family secret, maybe?

"Secrets?" said Aunt Rose from the head of the table. "There are no skeletons in our closet."

Only the furs . . . "Tell me about the old days, then."

"We had fun," said Aunt Minnie.

"The old days? Best forgotten."

"Uncle, play gin with me," exclaimed Carla's mother. Delayed by some appointment, she had arrived after the soup. Ethelma's and Sophie's husbands, having to work late, would not arrive at all.

"You haven't eaten enough," protested her aunts. But Carla's mother and Aunt Rose's husband had already left the table.

"Three-handed," called out Ethelma, and followed them.

"There's nothing to tell," resumed Gussie.

"There were so many of you," said Carla.

"There were so many of everybody."

"Your grandmother," said Minnie, "was our oldest . . ."

"Oh, Minnie."

"Min, she knows that."

". . . and our sweetest," finished Minnie.

Gussie said, "She was just eighteen when she married your grandfather."

Rose said, "Seventeen."

"Have it your way."

"In our living room, there was a pile of jackets on every chair."

"Except for Uncle Yossil's chair."

"On Uncle Yossil's chair there was a pile of Uncle Yossil."

"Yossil had fleas. He lived with us on Allen Street."

"Lice. Ludlow Street."

"Allen!"

"Have it your way."

Bickering, they remembered more. Barrels of pickles. Chickens in the shop downstairs. Children dying—other families' children, the little brothers and sisters of their friends.

Sophie was blowing smoke in her sisters' faces. Minnie was wearing her most foolish mouth, Rose her most implacable one. Gussie struggled to retain control of the meeting. Carla tried to imitate the neutrality of her father, who paid such respectful attention to his patients' narratives. He'd sit at the telephone, examining his own very clean right hand. "How many minutes apart?" he'd interrupt soothingly. "How severe? How much discharge?" "How many bedrooms?" Carla asked.

One bedroom and an alcove, for six daughters. Also a bedroom for the parents.

Only five daughters on Ludlow, Sophie reminded them; she herself had been born in the Bronx. She had been born after Carla's grandmother had gotten married. That's how young she was.

A wonderful wedding. Too bad for Sophie she hadn't been born yet. But they had all been wonderful weddings. All weddings were wonderful.

Carla thought of tender brides, tiny as waitresses. She thought of the thin young grooms, terrified behind mannish mustaches. Touch me not! There were numerous martyrs who had refused to marry though requested to by anxious parents. And then to be canonized! The awkwardness for Christian and Jew alike, Carla supposed, was in failing to get asked . . .

Carla's grandmother got married, somebody began again. It was a wonderful wedding. She went off to live in New England. It might as well have been New South Wales. They had never taken in boarders, only an occasional cousin. What about Yossil, who stayed four years? Why count the Yossil, he didn't pay a penny, and slept in his chair? When they moved to the Bronx they didn't take him along. Yes they did. No they didn't. Maybe for a season. Have it your way.

The move to the Bronx was a step in the right direction. A third bedroom, at the end of a long hall. An upright piano . . .

Sophie's fingers could stretch an octave; she demonstrated on the tablecloth. Aunt Minnie had started to hum. Gussie's eyes were closing.

"It's time for cake," announced Aunt Rose. She stood up. "No, no, Carla, Min and I will clear."

"You and me can do the dishes later, honey," said Aunt Minnie. "Go and look around."

So Carla wandered through the apartment that she had once found sumptuous. She noted threadbare rugs and faded wallpaper. There was no denying the advanced age of the plush couch.

Near the couch was a bridge table. There, slapping cards around, were three bandits—the quiet uncle, the hunched and muttering Ethelma, and Carla's mother, laughing over her booty . . . Next came an alcove, meant to be a den, where Minnie the unmarried slept. Off the hall was a gray bedroom.

Aunt Rose was the only New York sister to own a double bed, though

up in Yankeeland Carla's grandmother had one too. Aunt Rose's marriage bed was a four-poster. A framed portrait of Aunt Rose in her wedding dress stood on top of a very high chest of drawers. Carla had to stand on a chair.

Aunt Rose was said to have been beautiful. Carla, holding the picture at arm's length, thought that on her wedding day Rose had looked tender. Rose had been too particular, the story went on. Rose had foolishly turned down men of promise. Then she'd had to . . . settle. But she'd borne a son, after all—no small accomplishment in that family. He was now grown and married himself.

What could be learned from Aunt Rose? From Aunt Minnie? From this apartment, which was not a tremendous improvement over the railroad flat of Rose's young womanhood? *Must* one's fortunes improve? She, Carla, could renounce riches . . .

"You silly girl."

Carla looked down from her chair. Aunt Rose looked up.

"I wanted to see your photograph," said Carla.

Aunt Rose's unexpected smile revealed perfect false teeth. "For one day I resembled my mother."

Her mother . . . To step backwards another generation was dizzying. Yet Aunt Rose's mother was their common parent. Mater Admirabilis. In this ill-lit room Aunt Rose's upturned face was as yellow as custard. But she was still smiling. Was Carla the first celebrant ever at this portrait? Rose's hair was gray now, and her eyes narrow. She certainly did not resemble her sisters. "Was your mother . . . pious?"

"Six daughters would make any woman pious."

"And a cold water flat . . ." murmured the girl.

"We had hot. She sewed every night. Every night. When we grew up we went out to business, but she still did all the mending. Though her eyesight was failing . . . On holidays we felt special. That chair is rickety. Please get down."

Carla, not budging, held the photograph to her chest. "Was it fun?"

Rose, not smiling now, dully echoed her niece. "Fun."

Carla noticed books on the bedside table. "Book-read, but not smart," Carla's grandmother had said, summing up her sister. A string bag dangled from a doorknob. "She was never . . . amusing," Carla's mother had mentioned. A picture of a middle-aged man hung on the wall. Aunt Rose had

pampered her son like a prince. "Though I'm told of no royal connections," Ethelma had said.

"Fun?" repeated Aunt Rose, nobody's favorite. She lay down on the bed, her head against a bolster. "I was a good student at high school."

Carla teetered in silence.

"I liked it. I liked High," said Rose with an air of astonishment. "If you fall from that chair and kill yourself, don't come running to me." She closed her eyes.

Carla replaced Rose the bride and got down from the chair. She glided towards her resting aunt—Rose the ailing. Her face was so white: very nearly Rose the corpse.

Carla lay down on the other side of the woman. Rose's lids were still closed. What was it like to notice that your two littlest sisters were the age of grandmothers and had dyed their hair red? Rose's husband was not prosperous. She would not be seeing the Pope in Rome. She would not even be getting a new couch. "Rose is none too well," Gussie had said tolerantly. Rose would grow older and sicker; she would read novels from the rental library and find fault with them; she would prepare, resentfully, to meet her Maker. Her sisters would nurse her until the end. They would hold conversations outside her hospital door.

"It wasn't so bad," the old lady was murmuring. Carla slid off the bed and backed into the hall. Now all she could see of Rose were two feet in black-laced shoes. Shoes on the bedspread! Rose was sicker than anybody knew.

Carla sat down next to Aunt Minnie on the brown plush couch. Minnie was embroidering poorly.

Minnie said, "We decided to have our cake later. Tell me everything. Who's your boyfriend?"

"I haven't got one."

"Really?" Aunt Minnie fingered Carla's jumper. "Pretty clothes you girls wear these days. Honest, you're as pretty as a picture. Honest, I could eat you up."

She gazed full face at Carla, and indeed she did look hungry. Though she had devoured the meal as eagerly as the rest of the family, her breath was odorless. Perhaps she was a demon. Aunt Minnie's sisters saw her as simple. But Aunt Minnie's face—the white bangs, the big chin, the tirelessly smiling mouth—did not seem simple to Carla. Carla saw her own

face—bangs, glasses, and chin—reflected in Aunt Minnie's glasses. In medieval times, she had read, people believed you could kill a chimera by forcing it to face its own reflection . . .

Carla wrenched her glance away. Aunt Rose returned from her bedroom. The card players straggled in. They all ate cake and drank coffee. They discussed some more cousins. Certain ones had diseases. Somebody's daughter was marrying a non-Jew.

"An Ethic-Culturist," defended Aunt Minnie.

"An ordinary Goy," snapped Gus.

Aunt Minnie's smile never wavered. All during the washing up with Carla, she hummed. Rose quietly put the dishes away—Rose, who had liked High.

They took a cab home. There were no pop-up chairs. Gussie the Commander pushed the others into the back seat: Ethelma, Carla, Sophie, and Carla's mother. She herself joined the driver in front.

Carla sank down between the fur arms of Sophie and Ethelma. "Like camp," she murmured.

"What's that?"

"She feels cozy," explained Carla's mother.

She woke up when the cab stopped in front of Aunt Sophie's West Side apartment house. Sophie climbed over Carla and Ethelma and got out of the cab. Then she plunged her arm among their calves and extracted her umbrella.

"Good night, good night."

Carla leaned against the remaining fur, Aunt Ethelma's, and closed her eyes. "Why did Aunt Minnie never marry?"

"Oh, Minnie," sighed Gussie from the front.

"Minnie," echoed Ethelma, as if to clarify.

Carla's eyes flew open. A family secret had surfaced at last. Minnie, besides being a chimera, had something wrong with her, something which precluded marriage. What was Minnie's condition, wondered Carla, and could it be inherited diagonally? Her mother looked joyously into her face. "Minnie just never wanted to, dear. Marriage, raising a family . . . it all seemed too much."

"Oh. Do you ever find it all too much?"

"Often," laughed her mother. "No, not really. Never."

But during Minnie's girlhood no one would have known that she

would find everything too much. All the daughters were supposed to marry, Minnie included. Minnie had joined her sisters at the upright piano, entertaining boyfriends. Clever Ethelma offered candy. Gus had such a head for figures. Sophie could stretch an octave. Rose fussily tossed her head. Minnie tried to deal a hand, and dropped the deck. "Oh, Minnie," everyone groaned.

"What did Minnie want instead?" asked Carla carelessly.

Gussie turned around and regarded her relatives. "Minnie didn't know what she wanted. These days, girls know."

"Your mother knew," said Ethelma.

"She held out for a doctor," said Gussie.

Carla's mother looked out the window.

"One thing I know, Carla," said Ethelma. "Your mother was beautiful."

"Still is," said Gussie.

"Caught a handsome guy."

"Your father," Gussie explained. "A prince."

"She should be grateful."

"She should behave."

"No more gallivanting with old friends."

"She knows what we mean."

"There's another of those Santas," said Carla's mother. "Reeling." Her long, pointed, amusing nose lifted as she laughed.

"You *are* beautiful," whispered Carla, surprising herself.

"Thank you, darling," her mother whispered back.

They passed the inky park. They passed the Plaza Hotel. They turned right and passed Tiffany's. They hurtled down Fifth as they had done two nights ago when this visit was new, before Carla's mother had turned girlish and flighty.

They stopped at a red light. Carla gazed past her mother's profile at a window display. The Babe lay surrounded by His visitors. The Kings' robes were as purple as ink. Royalty was all over the place tonight: Rose's son, Carla's father. Could she, Carla, also hold out for a Prince? "How about a Prince of the Church?" she yawned.

Ethelma said, "In our day a man without an accent was already a prince."

"Maybe I will marry a real prince," tested Carla.

Gus fixed determined eyes on the girl. "You will marry a nice boy."

VI

The next day was very cold. "Bundle up!" the desk clerk advised as Carla left the hotel. Under many sweaters she felt as fat as Santa Claus. But the women hurrying into Saint Patrick's wore only thin cloth coats. One of them, in the act of kneeling, disclosed the scallop of a waitress's apron.

Carla sidled from pillar to pillar. She observed pairs of nuns, the priest, a stout weeping woman. Finally she darted out of the cathedral. She had a date with Aunt Ethelma at Schrafft's. Her mother had gone to Brooklyn to consult with their cousin the furrier.

Carla walked quickly. She no longer gaped at buildings nor pressed her face against store windows. She avoided the street corner Saint Nicks, who drank their alms.

In front of the restaurant, Aunt Ethelma was staring anxiously into the street. She held her pocketbook with both hands.

"Here I am," called the girl.

Aunt Ethelma turned. "At last!"

"I'm not late."

"I was early. What can't happen to a maiden on the streets?"

In Aunt Ethelma the family exophthalmia was aggravated. Perhaps she overdid the henna. But her protruding eyes were kindly. The smile above the receding chin was generous. In Aunt Ethelma's face Carla could read the family history. Gin played at the sick-beds of children. Death watches. Disappointments, disillusionments, all transcended. As long as sisters are still speaking, can anything else matter? Even insults can be ignored: even the swinish behavior of that Flatbush cousin who, knowing the score, had fitted out Gussie with the nice Persian, Sophie with the seal, and then awarded her, Ethelma, this beaver that no customer would take . . . All that information in one face? Ethelma might have scoffed. One thing I know: faces aren't chronicles.

Ethelma steered Carla into the restaurant. They sat side by side against the wall, a non-confessional arrangement.

Carla asked, "Who is famous here today?"

"Today I am the best-known customer. Don't look at the prices, if you please. No one famous comes to Schrafft's."

"It's not good enough?"

"Here comes our waitress, sssh. She probably has feelings."

Aunt Ethelma and the waitress conferred like doctors. The result: two

chicken salads, on toast. The waitress went off. "Aunt Ethelma," Carla began.

"*Explica,* toots."

"I'm coming to you for . . . instruction."

"One thing I know: I don't know anything. What kind of instruction?"

"I want to be able to tell a real diamond, and a changed name. A fixed nose, too."

Aunt Ethelma laughed. "Sweetheart," she began, as benign as a Pope. "Sweetheart, I know nothing about stones. Noses you can examine yourself. Sit up straight. Names? Leedses and Lewises were once Levys, Taylors Tarlalaevskis. What else can I instruct you in?"

"What was my mother really like, young?" said the girl quickly.

"She was a perfect goose. Here's our lunch."

Aunt Ethelma dug in. No one in New York ever tired of eating. Carla took three bites of her sandwich and considered herself fed. She searched the room for men, and found two, lunching separately.

"No husbands here," she commented.

"A husband would be wasted in Schrafft's."

"She was a beauty?"

"Your mother? A queen." Aunt Ethelma swallowed an enormous bite. "In spades," she elaborated. "A gadabout, when she was single. She'd come to New York to visit us, she'd go out with thousands of men. A quiet person, but light of heart. Valuable in anybody's hand."

"I want to go to boarding school."

"Oatmeal and cold showers," rebuffed Ethelma.

"I'd like to be . . . intense."

"You will be," said the woman tenderly. "You can do it outside the cloister."

The girl flushed. "What were *you* like?"

"I? Naive."

"I don't believe it."

"I talked too much," admitted Aunt Ethelma. "I had a few boyfriends, not many. Some were go-getters. Your uncle was the easiest to be with, though he still picks his nose. I haven't regretted taking him. But I was ignorant, as innocent as a child."

Carla thought of Saint Catherine, who had rejected the importunate Maxentius in favor of the quiet-living Christ . . .

Aunt Ethelma continued. "I was as green when I married as . . . broccoli. Matrimony to me was a city without maps."

Years had passed. Was there anything about that terrain that Ethelma did not now understand? What matters had she not meditated on as she journeyed to alien neighborhoods?

"By the way, what's a marriage of convenience?" asked Carla.

"Every marriage is a marriage of convenience."

"Oh. Are husbands necessary or incidental?"

"Necessary," said the aunt. "In an incidental way."

Carla picked up a napkin and covered the lower half of her face.

Aunt Ethelma said, "One thing I know. The women who get along best . . . they are married."

Behind her napkin Carla pondered. There were disappointments worse than a disappointing husband, she supposed. Just as there were lives more spirited than those led within the walls. Still, Saint Catherine had found happiness with her Immortal Spouse. Maybe all virgins, believers or not, were nobly betrothed. Carla remembered the family scapegoat. "Minnie," she said.

"What? I can't hear you under that schmatte."

Carla raised her voice. "Poor Minnie."

"Why poor? It's not so terrible. Still . . . Minnie played a silly hand."

At last Carla lowered her veil. "What if I do, too?"

"You probably won't." Ethelma equivocal was more convincing than Gussie positive. "Either way, darling, life is with women." Though she made this remark in a casual tone, both kinswomen recognized the new and abiding truth it was.