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Sister Stories and Other Tales

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SISTER STORIES AND OTHER TALES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

by

Susan Ribner

B.A. Cornell University, 1962
M.A. Cornell University, 1965
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SISTER STORIES

My Story Lost and Found

July 1978:

I dream.

At the beach, the patch of sand next to me opens suddenly like a mouth, sucking into itself my sweatshirt, my towel, and my typed manuscript. Waves from the ocean rush up the beach and pour into the hole, flooding my things. I grab wildly into the hole and drag out my soaking towel and sweatshirt. But my manuscript is gone, lost deep underground.

I turn my head to the land and notice that water is running in thick streams down the roads, down from the hills, coming like a flood. Every part of the land is drowning.

June 1992:

I dream.

At a tag sale in Boston, rummaging through piles of second-hand goods, I open a frayed, hard-bound book and discover that it is the story of me and my family. In the margins I see my sister Margo's careful handwriting, her notes about the text, her notes about me. And there in the center is a color photograph of me and another young girl, both dressed in lacy-white Victorian clothes, sprawled on the living room floor of our house on Liberty Street. I must be three or four. My legs are spread wide at odd angles, like a broken doll. My clothes are in disarray, too much of my slip sticking out from my dress.

I'm stunned, sickened by this picture I didn't know existed, by what has been in print for everyone to see. Although I've never stolen anything before, I slip it into my large purse. I must own my own story.

A Good Sister

February 1987:

“Susie,” Margo asks from her hospital bed. “Have I been a good sister?”

It’s the day after Margo has understood she is going to die. The last ditch, anti-cancer treatments haven’t worked. Yesterday, when the oncologist told Margo, “There’s nothing more we can do,” she understood what we’ve all known for some time.

I’m standing at the window of the hospital room, my back to her, when she asks. I’ve been watching a tugboat pull a barge up the icy-gray East River, trying to recall the name of that damn tugboat in the children’s book our mother used to read to us. While I’ve expected things to change after yesterday, this is a shocker, the last question I want to hear—perhaps the hardest one of my life.

What can I say to my older sister, my only sister--when she’s about to die? Can I speak the truth? Speak those unspoken angers I’ve carried for years? Tell the hurts I don’t forgive? Or is there a special truth for dying sisters? (A special lie for dying sisters?) Do I even know the truth?

I turn and face Margo--a skeletal, tube-filled person, propped among a pile of pillows, her dark, frightened eyes fixed on me now.

“Yes,” I say, looking at her left hand, the IV poking into it, the crumbled bed sheets under it. “Of course you’ve been a good sister.”

But Margo is Margo, pressing right to the end.

“I mean *really*, Susie,” she asks.

* * *

In 1980, when Margo first got cancer, it seemed impossible that I could live on if she did not, so entwined was my life with hers. Certainly the grand cosmic law of Sisterhood (or perhaps Margo's grand law of Sisterhood) would not allow it—so powerful had she been in my life. My fear was so great, unconscious though it was, that for a few months my back gave out, and I went to bed, unavailable for donating my kidneys, my bone marrow, my very spirit, whatever she might ask for. Only when Margo returned to work and the coast seemed clear, did I get back up.

Yet seven years later, in the winter of 1986-87, Margo is dying, and I am not. She will never return home from her room in New York Hospital, where she's been since Thanksgiving. Never make it past fifty years. I, however, am here, breathing, on my feet, with no discernible physical ailments.

I visit Margo almost every day for three months, along with my mother, (recovering, herself, from a breakdown after my father's sudden death over a year ago.) She's come in from Connecticut to stay in Margo's apartment in Manhattan. She'll watch over Margo's sons--high school-aged, Danny, and the older boy, Zeke, when he's home on college breaks. These are the boys I will parent after Margo dies and my mother goes home, for the boys' father, Alfie, died two years ago of a heart attack.

I sit by Margo's bed these months, or by her armchair, when she's strong enough to sit up. I give her the best of my company, my sympathetic words, my help. I give her my time, knowing she would never do as much for me. Once a week is all I'd get, for sure, if the situation were reversed. "It's too much for me, Susie," she'd say. Yet it's clear that if I do not give Margo all I can, I will be immeasurably guilty, with no chance for redemption, after she is gone. Even more, watching Margo die is like watching myself die. How can I stay away?

December 1986:

At the start, in December, when there's still some hope, I am, foremost, Margo's supplier.

I bring her what she longs for. (I mostly know without asking): Mushroom-barley soup from the First Avenue Deli; the pink hand lotion that smells like gardenias; a cobalt-blue vase, her favorite color (*our* favorite color); Black Forest Cake from her local hangout, the weird Columbus Avenue restaurant, tiled in white so it looks like a bathhouse; Alice Munro's newest, *The Progress of Love*; Virginia Wolfe's *Letters, Vol. 3*; James Baldwin's essays, *The Price of the Ticket*; anything new from Nadine Gordimer; the *New York Times*.

Each time I see the tall pile of books on Margo's end table, I think of the story my mother tells—that when Margo was a baby, she could soothe her at night only by placing a small stack of her favorite books in a corner of her crib near her feet. No teddy bear would do the trick.

I bring Margo what she needs: the nurse down the hall who is late with the pain meds; the rolling, portable toilet for Margo's erratic, 20-second warning diarrhea; warm, wet paper towels I use afterwards to wash her bony backside; soft Kleenex to dry her; cash and more checkbooks from her Citibank account; and from the drugstore, ballpoint pens, spiral notepads, sharper tweezers for her eyebrows, and new razors for her chin. No Nair for her.

"It's a scam, Susie," Margo says from her bed, waving her skinny free arm in the air, "conning women into using all this expensive junk on their faces. If it's OK for men to shave, then it's OK for women. The hair doesn't grow in any thicker or darker. It's just propaganda!" (She's got me convinced.)

At least once a week, I bring Margo the large hand mirror, which we keep on the window ledge, a small bowl of warm water from the bathroom, and soap. On the moveable table that swings over her bed, we set up for chin shaving. Margo does the job herself.

I watch Margo as she shaves, and try not to take in how much she's changed—her silky brown hair turned coarse and gray, her prized high cheekbones, too prominent, too bony, her long-lashed brown eyes, so like my father's, now sunken and dull.

We do the bills next, and her appointment book, if she wants. While I sit cross-legged on the bed near her feet and arrange the mail, she pulls out her checkbook, datebook, and pen from her neat drawer in the bedside table. We have a system. She writes the checks, records them. I stuff the envelopes, lick, stamp, and mail them. Next, if she's not too tired, she decides which friends who've called will visit her, when, and which friends will not. "I can't see Brenda anymore" she says to me. "I feel guilty, but she's too needy. I just don't have the energy." Later, at home, I call Margo's friends and make dates or excuses.

I bring Margo, too, what *I* need to bring her: One forty-dollar pill, about the size of a kumquat, from Dr. Shen, a traditional herbal man I secretly meet in Chinatown. I agonize for weeks about this pill, not wanting to schlepp so far downtown in the icy weather to this miracle doctor I heard about, not wanting to spend so much money. But, on the phone, Dr. Shen insists that his pills shrink tumors. And what if he is right? What if these are the exact pills that can save Margo's life, and I, too cheap, too lazy, do nothing?

Finally I take the two subways down to Canal St., walk the long blocks toward Chinatown in the freezing wind, turn down Mott, past all the noisy restaurants, and find my way to the doctor's office on Bayard, where I wait forever in a crumbly room with four acupuncture

patients, in various stages of treatment and undress, who lie on tables or slump in chairs, with needles poking out of their ankles, ears, and hands. Black lumps of herbal moxa burn from the ends of their needles, filling the room with a not unpleasant, marijuana-like smoke. When Dr. Shen finally appears, I hand over my two \$20s, buy my one pill, and walk outside into the cold wind, proud that I've made myself do this.

The next day in the hospital I'm nervous about facing Margo. For all her years of radical politics—her civil rights activism, her courageous marriage to Alfie, an African-American, her ardent feminism—she's closed and rigid in many ways. Certainly this is true about what she eats. Before her illness it was a tuna fish sandwich (with mayo and chopped onion) and vanilla yogurt for lunch—every day for years. No sushi, or snails, or Stilton cheese for Margo.

I take my risk at lunchtime. After Margo picks at her mashed potatoes and I scarf down her uneaten meatloaf, string beans, and chocolate pudding, I take the precious pill from my backpack, unwrap it from its thick white paper, and place it delicately on her eating table.

Margo refuses. "I need to believe in my doctors, Susie," she says, making an effort to explain, even though I can tell from her tight jaw that she's angry, threatened, I imagine, by my bent toward things Asian and alternate. "It's too upsetting for me to think about these other ways. Do you understand?" she asks, trying to be kind.

In fact, I don't. Margo will, I'm afraid, choose death rather than swallow a Chinese pill I suggest. I can't see at the time that she needs to direct her own fate, that she has a life and a death separate from my own.

I bring Margo a young, blond hypnotist who specializes in cancer cases. Margo agrees to see her, reluctantly, for nothing can soothe the afternoon pain in her hip and leg. While I'm

exiled to the orange plastic chair in the visitor's lounge, where I write lesson plans for the karate class I'll teach that night, the hypnotist interviews my sister, spinning out from Margo's mind her favorite dream place—perhaps (for Margo never tells me) the huge Cape Cod dunes at Truro on a day when the sun shines down strong, the sandpipers rush along the water's edge, the green surf crashes, and Margo dives sharply, head on into the breakers and swims way out past the rough surf, kicking with her tan, muscular legs, doing her graceful crawl with the fancy flip of her wrist at the end of each stroke.

The hypnotist returns in two days with a 30-minute tape for Margo. Each afternoon now when Margo's pain pulses down her leg, she slips the tape into the fireman-red, plastic tape player her friend Ginny brought last week, and motions for all visitors to leave or be quiet. She puts on her earphones, presses the play button on this little machine, so like a child's lunch box, and travels slowly, by herself, to her favorite place, the gentle narrative filling her ears, her mind, her body space.

What I do not bring Margo this December is my touch. I do not stroke her hands or rub her head softly, brushing back the wispy hair the way my mother sometimes does when Margo asks her. I do not put my arms around Margo's pale skin, her emaciated torso, her dying body. I do not kiss her tight jaw, so like my own.

We do not touch like this. It's not revulsion for her skinny bones, hanging skin, deadly pallor and dry lips. It's not fear of her body fluids, which I know all too well, (gagging in the bathroom when I empty her bedpans). It's more serious.

We do not touch like this.

I do not love Margo like this. Nor she me.

Touching

Winter 1987:

As I keep this distance from Margo, reading in the chair across the room or standing at the large hospital window, I do not remember that there was a time, far in the past, when Margo and I used to touch. Not long after Margo's death, however, I will come upon photos in my filing cabinet that remind me this was so.

I take out the small pile and spread them out on my desk. The photos of Margo and me were taken during The War (as we called World War II) when I was two and three and four, and we all moved to be with my father, a psychiatrist, who was stationed at Air Force bases in Colorado and Nebraska. In all the photos, Margo, more than a foot taller than I, clasps my hand or wraps one arm around my small waist, while I frown and squint into the sun, which always seemed too bright for me when my father posed us for pictures. (*But is this proof of Margo's desire? "Hold Susie's hand," Daddy might have ordered her.*)

There we are, sitting side by side on the slate steps of our rented brick house in Denver, Margo's arm around me. About six, Margo looks cherubic, happy, with her shiny dutch-boy haircut and sharp, straight bangs. (This would have been a good style for her later, I think.) I, just two, am more disheveled with my flyaway blond curls and bags under my eyes, even then. We both wear neat cotton dresses, mine with smocking in the front, a favorite style of my mother's in those days, and Margo's covered by a white fluffy pinafore. Both of us wear white socks, black mary janes.

There we are, perhaps a year or two later, standing side by side, posing for my father in our winter coats before the tall, bare trees and the looming wooden house where we had an

upstairs apartment in Lincoln, Nebraska. This is an especially bad hair period for both of us, our tresses long, fluffy, out of control. Margo has a silly bow in her hair and a goofy expression on her face. But, I notice, she holds my hand.

As I sit at my desk, looking at these photos, I begin to remember other times when I know we touched, by choice. Several years after Nebraska, when I was eight and Margo twelve, and the family was back in Connecticut, living on Liberty Street, Margo and I shared a large bedroom. We had bunk beds in the beginning, but were happiest when these were dismantled and placed next to each other.

I'd go to bed before Margo most nights, but whenever it pleased her, she'd nudge me out of my new sleep, crawl into bed with me, and whisper, "Susie, let's do the tickle thing."

I'd be flattered by my big sister's attention, but reluctant, tired after a hard summer's day outdoors. While Margo was off with her gang, playing complicated games like Ringolevio, which I didn't understand and wasn't asked to join, I'd be busy jumping double-dutch with neighbors Paula and Marcia, or pogo-sticking all the way down Liberty Street, past Lincoln school, where I went to Third grade, down the steep hill to my best friend Janice Bertuzzi's house to weed and hoe our tiny garden of carrots, tomatoes, and lettuce.

Or perhaps I'd be tired from a rigorous winter's day, what with school, dodge-ball at recess, after school homework, snowman building, or perhaps a long walk alone with Margo to Blackfield University to ice skate on that small weeping-willow tree pond, where our only accompaniment was the lone young priest who whirled around by himself, his long black robe flying out at his sides. If we hit the time just right, he would teach us how to shoot the duck or to spin. Margo could really spin.

But no matter how tired I was at night, Margo would persist.

“Come one, Susie. Come on,” she’d press. “It’ll be fun.”

I’d always give in, roll over, and start bargaining for who would tickle first, the least desirable spot.

I’d always go first.

Our tickling was not for laughs, but for pleasure of the touch. I’d lie on my back with Margo’s arm draped over my chest, and very lightly run my fingers up and down the length of her arm, first on the outside and then the inside. If I lagged, drifted off toward sleep, she’d grumble. “More, Susie, just a little more,” she’d say.

Some nights, Margo would roll up her pajama top and turn her back to me. I’d push her silky brown hair off her shoulders, and lightly, gently, travel up, down, and around her strong, slender back, from the neck down to the waist. My arm would get tired, and my required time felt interminable. But the prize at the end, being touched by Margo, a skilled tickler, was worth it.

We touched each other at Blackfield Beach, a scruffy public beach on Long Island Sound, where we spent many summer days when we were old enough to walk or bike there by ourselves. We’d rub suntan oil over each other’s backs and down each other’s legs. Later, if our friends hadn’t shown up, Margo’s favorite lifeguard wasn’t on duty, or the water was full of jellyfish, we’d lie next to each other on our identical pink towels, decorated with sparkly horse heads and R insignias, and Margo would brush the sand off my tan forearm or my back, and say, “Close your eyes, Susie,” and with her long finger, intently trace mystery letters on my skin. “Susie, I’m writing the name of my favorite song,” she’d say. “Guess what it is?”

“Susie, my movie star heart throb. Guess who?”

“Susie, my secret crush. Who?”

And then we’d switch.

* * *

And what of that odd memory that will come to me years later, long after Margo’s death? It is just this—a vision of Margo holding me in her arms, stroking my head, my hair, soothing me after some trauma, saying to me, in the gentlest, sweetest way, “There, there.”

* * *

Bad Girls

Spring 1958:

If you stick out your tight-sweatered breasts, spread scarlet lipstick on your mouth, and look boys straight in the eye, as my sister Margo used to do, or dip your head down a little so your eyes look up like that steamy Lauren Bacall, then the boys will swarm around and you'll get them for sure, their mouths, their arms, their hips. But you could get hurt. They could suddenly jerk your bra up around your neck, mash your breasts with their big hands, kiss you so your red mouth smears like a clown, and rip your clothes crooked. They might grab your wrists so they hurt, and press you flat onto the cracked leather back seats of their cars or the cold sand of Blackfield beach, and make you do it.

It could happen. At least, now, at 17, I was afraid it could.

It was a feeling I'd had for several years, starting when I was 12, before Margo left home for college. Back then, when my parents were away on their Spring cruises to Cuba or Curacao, I'd ride my bike home at dusk to find strange cars in the driveway of the large stone house we'd recently moved to on Dogwood Hill Lane. Our backyard would be strewn with grown-up high school boys, lying on the grass in the shadows of the beech trees, their arms locked around some girls, one of them Margo. Or I'd find her in our darkened living room, her body spread on the lap of a boy who lounged in my father's red leather chair, his beer can soaking one of my father's psychiatric journals, his cigarette dropping ashes on the oriental rug. Margo's arm would be flung around the boy's shoulders, her breasts in her tight sweater pressing against his chest, her bright red lips brushing his ear, whispering words I couldn't hear, didn't want to hear. Other couples lay with their limbs intertwined on the two velvet couches my mother had just bought.

They drank liquor out of silver flasks, and I'd worry they'd spill their drinks, throw up, or do sex things I didn't want to see.

Sometimes, a couple of stray boys would corner me in the kitchen or dining room, smiling at me, shifting their slim hips, emptying their beer cans and crunching them in their hands, while they tilted their heads and quizzed me—Margo's little sister. I was scared of what these thick-muscled, loud-voiced, electrically charged boys would do, scared that sex would burst out from them and smother or stab me.

Although I was still fearful at 17, I had grown up, and now I too wanted these boys. I wanted to smell them, put my nose in their sweet hair, press my face into their white T-shirts. I wanted to rest my palms on their tight forearms, interlock my fingers with theirs. I wanted their thick arms around my shoulders, their hands in my hair, thumbs on my cheeks. I wanted their lips on my mouth.

But I would play this differently than Margo. I would keep my sweaters loose, wear light pink lipstick instead of red, and never flirt openly. If I didn't act like a fast girl, a bad girl, then maybe I could get a boy, some boys, and be safe at the same time.

I was trying out this new plan with Carl Gunderson. I remembered that day in November when Patsy and Gail, my best friends, and I had leaned against our lockers at school, watching the boys go by, our blue canvas, 3-ring notebooks piled high with books held in front of our chests. I was wearing my favorite emerald-green tweed suit with a white cashmere sweater. The three of us talked about the digestive organs we'd been molding out of clay in Gail's basement for science class. But I was waiting for Carl, the compact, cute football captain. He wasn't a college-bound kid, but I'd heard he was smart and funny. He had a zip haircut, not like his friend

Jim Zalbo, a hood with a motorcycle, who wore his hair in a slicked-back DA like that slimy, scary Elvis Presley. I yearned for this crew-cut boy.

When Carl finally sauntered down the hall, I'd followed him with my eyes without turning my head. I wouldn't let my best friends see me flirt. "But how will we ever get the intestines to stick on the poster board?" is what I'd said to them. Inside I was shouting, "Carl, Carl, look at me." He bent at his locker, spun his combination, twisted just a bit, and looked clean at me. I gave the tiniest of smiles to let him know that I saw him, liked him.

The next week Carl rang the doorbell of our house and entered through our front door with the huge lion-head knocker to pick me up for a date. He looked so good in his sharp white T-shirt, his Marlboros rolled up in one sleeve. I didn't care that he shook my parents' hands and said, "Nice t'uv met yuz all," a phrase my father would mimic three times the next day while my mother stood by and said nothing. Carl, the popular boy, the football player, had chosen me, even though I'd used only my careful, good-girl ways. No one had seen me ask for it.

Why was it then that in spite of my caution with Carl, (and with any boys I'd dated before), I still felt "bad," as if I'd done all the dirty things that my father's curled lip and his breakfast question, "What time did you get in last night?" implied. Even if I'd stayed home every night, studying in my bedroom, it would not have been proof enough for him that I was still the pure girl he expected me to be. But I didn't question my father. His tight lips and sarcasm frightened me.

And, in truth, I wasn't so sure about my purity.

There was that photo of me, snapped the past winter by my high school pal and next door neighbor, Paulie Zucker. It was the photo I hid in the green padded diary I locked with a tiny key. It was the photo that fell out from the pages onto my pillow some nights when I opened the

diary to write, and I'd grab at it, terrified my father would walk through my unlockable bedroom door and see my sins. There I was on a bar stool in Paulie's basement rec room. And I was dirty. It was as if you could smell the stench of semen rising off my hands, even though my right hand held playing cards, and my left, a cigarette. Even though these were hands with no memory, no knowledge, of semen.

In the photo my small breasts were hidden behind the cards, under the heavy wool sweater with the sports stripes around the upper arms. My white blouse underneath was buttoned tight at the neck. Yet I might as well have been a bare-breasted stripper. My shiny clean hair was smoothed into its neat pageboy, yet the careful effort it must have taken to produce this perfect curl was evidence enough of my impure intentions. My white skin was too dark—(surely I had never looked as dark as I did in this photo)—further proof of what a bad girl I was. A dark Jewish girl. No Christian friend of mine would look this dark. My blond classmates, Sally Clark and Candy Wilson, would surely have emitted a white light in such a snapshot. That I looked straight into the camera, flaunting my cards and my cigarette was most dangerous of all. Without apology, I showed myself.

I hated the photo. But for some reason I didn't understand, I would not throw it out. I hid the photo and remained fearful my father would find it.

Did I think my father would know by this snapshot of his brazen dark daughter what else had gone on in Paulie's basement. It was often there, right next door to our house, that my friends and I had parties on the weekends. Could my father see through the photo into the days past, see behind the cards, see through the smoke, how I'd slow danced some Friday nights to Paulie's 45's of Johnny Mathis and Nat King Cole, so close to the boys that I could feel that rod-like skinny part that pressed against my belly or my hip, that erection that none of us ever

mentioned, that I'd never touched, that I'd never been expected to touch? But I'd been expected to keep dancing close and pretend that I hadn't noticed. And I'd been playing this game.

Perhaps my father could see what it was I did want on those nights when I'd had several beers, when Paulie had turned the room dark, and Carl and I sat in the pine-paneled corner, kissing. Or even more, when I went out parking at Blackfield Beach or on dead-end streets with Carl. I liked his tongue in my mouth. I liked when we'd kissed so long in the front seat of his car that my lips were sore, my ears rang, and my breath was hard to catch. It was then, when I felt gloriously lost in the air, my brain drugged on the kissing, my underpants soaked, that I let Carl put his hands on my breasts on top of my loose sweaters, and when I was very daring, crazed, let him succeed at unhooking my bra and putting his eager hands, sometimes his mouth, on my skin, my nipples.

But I'd let this go only so far. Sometimes, Carl lay on top of me in the back seat of his car and rubbed his whole body against mine, (his pants closed), kissing me harder and squeezing my breasts. I'd grasp his head, my thumbs rubbing hard, unconsciously against his bristly crew cut as we kissed. But this was when I knew to say, "Stop Carl. That's enough. We have to stop." He'd protest, "Aw, come on!" but it was just for show. He knew the rules, and he'd always stop.

I felt sorry for Carl, sure I was giving him "blue balls"—at least that's what we girls thought happened to such frustrated boys. But I could not go the next step or even think about what we would do next if we kept going. Exactly what would go on below the waist was fuzzy—like the blurry glass placed in front of people's faces on TV to protect identities. In my mind, the same wavy blur rested over all our high school genitals. I knew the technical facts, of course, but exactly how the boys' parts would fit with mine and what this would feel like was still a mystery

I was happy to solve at some future time. I wanted to be safe. I wanted to do this right. I wanted to be unlike Margo.

The code of the times was strong: good girls didn't do it. (I did have some questions, though, about Maxine Brodsky). And I was a good girl.

* * *

Wonderful, Wonderful

Spring 1958:

Margo rushes into the living room, slaps on a record, and zooms back to her kitchen project—whipping up something white in a bowl. I'm pacing her living room floor, waiting for my date.

"Dvorak," she shouts from the kitchen.

The "New World Symphony" blasts through the apartment. Ah, I know this well although I'm often not familiar with Margo's music. She likes symphonies without melodies and jazz singers without words. But when she was thirteen and I was nine, we were sent to a theatre camp in the Berkshires where she danced as a cog in a machine to this "New World" music, while I tried out for Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, and got the Wicked Witch instead. (I mastered the art of melting on stage, but stayed convinced I'd have gotten the better part if I'd been a blond.)

Now I pace the room to Dvorak's heavy beat.

"He isn't here yet, Susie?" Margo yells, stirring up my fear that Aaron Moss, the Harvard freshman I'm fixed up with, might be wandering around Cambridge, unable to find the side entrance to Margo's apartment in this rickety, three-story house.

I stop at the full-length mirror, smooth my beige cashmere sweater, pat my hair, and check one more time to see if my stomach is flat and my stocking seams straight. If I concentrate on my looks, maybe I can forget how crazy Margo's been acting ever since I arrived from Connecticut for this visit yesterday.

I've never seen her like this. I've always been uncomfortable when Margo's acted too flirty with boys, but this is frightening. It's as if she's flipped a sex drive switch and gone out of control. That awful word "nympho," the one my friends and I use nervously for the loose girls in our high school, jumps into my head as I picture that big-eared co-worker from Margo's TV job she coaxed back here to sleep with her last night after we all ate fried clams together at Howard Johnson's. I heard him leave in the middle of the night. And then there's the pasty-faced, bald guy she was moaning with this morning—the "wrong number man" is how I think of him. He dialed her number by mistake at nine a.m. and ended up in her bed by eleven.

I put my palms on my temples to hold back an oncoming headache and step closer to the mirror.

I'm glad I've been working on my looks lately. I decided two months ago that I'd been much too lazy in this department, and so devised a beautification plan designed to outdo my high school rival, Susan Friedman, of the plush cashmere sweaters, gold locket, lace dickies, and Scottish kilts. My secret desire is to beat her in the "Best Dressed" Senior contest.

Most school days now I'm up at six a.m., a half hour earlier than usual, to pluck my eyebrows and pat tan powder on my face to cover my few remaining pimples, creating a snappy contrast with my pink lipstick. After a rough night with my head in bobby pins, I can comb my too curly brown hair into a sleek pageboy with a wavy dip in front like the movie star Veronica Lake. I polish my loafers to a super shine, and wear expensive sweaters and tweed skirts that my mother is pleased to buy me. I measure out a tiny bowl of Special K cereal, and go to school starving.

Margo changes the record. "Mel Torme," she says. "Scat."

In the mirror I notice my hair frizzing up on this muggy April night. Soon I'll look more like frumpy Claudette Colbert than slinky Veronica. Beads of sweat dot my forehead. I grab a Kleenex from the small alligator purse my parents gave me for Christmas, and my "Pink Passion" lipstick falls on the floor--the new one I bought last week at Lead's Department Store with my best friend Patsy.

This date was Patsy's idea. We lay on the twin beds in her room a few weeks ago, eating pretzels, memorizing the opening stanzas of "Evangeline." We couldn't get past the part, "Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms," without breaking into hysterics over both "hoar" and "bosom," imagining ourselves reciting these words in class. So we switched to the sister discussion. I told Patsy that Margo had called the night before, asking me to visit her in Cambridge for a weekend. "Come on, Susie," she'd said. "We'll have fun! My new apartment is right near Harvard Square."

I knew Margo would take me to Bailey's, that swell ice-cream shop on Harvard Square we'd gone to before. We'd probably visit Grandma and Grandpa Lewin, too, in their large brick, book-strewn home in Brookline, where we'd lived for a year during the war and I'd gone to kindergarten while my father was stationed at an Air Force base in Texas. Stately Grandma Lewin in her light blue smock would stride out of her studio where she'd been painting watercolor still lifes of flowers in copper pots. She'd don her fur coat and hat, take her daily brisk walk around the neighborhood, and then cook lunch for Margo and me—halibut, smothered in butter—in her sunny, narcissus-filled kitchen. Grandpa, a diabetic, would tell jokes and try to teach us cribbage, while he ate candies he'd hidden in his pants pocket. "You! my grandmother would yell at him. "What's that in your pocket? What's that in your mouth?" Grandma's bossy nature made me nervous, but grandpa's sweetness was worth the visit.

I wanted to go to Cambridge. I was flattered that Margo had asked me. This was Margo after all—my older sister, my only sister, my mentor. The family dynamo. My dynamo. The person who had always interpreted the world for me.

It wasn't so much that Margo told me what I *had* to think when I was growing up. It's just that she told me what she thought was true or odd or just or horrible, and when she said with great surety that Tom Lehrer's "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park" was hilarious, that Harry Belafonte was to swoon over (even though he wasn't white), that Will Lord was the handsomest guy she'd ever dated (so she'd carved his name into the headboard of her gray-painted wooden bed), and that Tigress perfume, with the imitation fur on the bottle top, was the only one to buy on the main floor of Lead's Department Store, I just knew it was true.

She'd been my role model always—and it was her lead through high school I'd followed. I'd tried to be the pretty, popular cheerleader, basketball player, yearbook editor, all-A (mostly) student that Margo was. And Margo had been a rebel. It was scary sometimes, but kind of great. She'd always done daring things like march for nuclear disarmament and civil rights, and then had had the guts to argue these politics at the dinner table with my stern father, risking his angry outbursts while my mother looked distraught and stared at her pork chops. I'd tried to speak up in a nuclear weapons debate last year, but my father had given me his evil-eye look and said, "Shut up! What do you know?" I'd been afraid to speak at the table ever since.

But in other ways I was a rebel, too, like Margo, at least against my parents. And Margo was with me on this. Although her actions sometimes scared me, we'd had an unspoken pact that we were allies forever and would never tell on each other when one of us did things our parents disapproved of, like having beer parties at home when they were away on cruises (Margo) or

driving on the highway across the Connecticut border to the closest New York taverns, where the drinking age was only 18 (me). We'd shared secrets and protected each other.

So I was pleased when my parents said I could visit Margo in Cambridge. I was a little frightened because she'd recently dropped out of Wellesley. She'd had some troubles these last couple of years--nervous breakdowns I didn't know a lot about, except that my parents were upset and running up to Boston all the time. I tried not to think about it too much and didn't really understand what a "breakdown" meant. And no one, not Margo, not my tight-lipped mother, not my psychiatrist father, discussed it with me. But now apparently, Margo was doing better, working at a progressive TV station and taking Political Science courses at Brandeis. Best of all, she was living the grown-up life in her first apartment.

"Go to Boston," Patsy said, flopping over on her back, knocking "Evangeline" to the floor. She was envious. Her older sister, who still lived at home, rarely spoke to her except to call her "goofball" or "gawky."

"And Sue-ie! What about that adorable Aaron Moss? My god! He's a freshman at Harvard!" she said, flipping herself over again, back onto her elbows. Aaron was the doe-eyed heartthrob we'd met at Paulie's party over Christmas. Patsy was right. Harvard was a big deal. Boys from our public high school in this small town of Blackfield never made it to Harvard or nearby Yale. And we'd never dated any boys who were in college before.

But more than this, I felt I'd made a special connection with this handsome Aaron. At the party, we'd sat and talked together for a long time in the corner of Paulie's basement, discussing Aaron's first months in college, and how he'd missed his family, especially his sick little sister. I

was touched that he'd confided in me, and we'd even slow-danced a couple of times before he left early with his friends.

"I'll ask my cousin Stevie," said Patsy. "He's friends with Aaron. Maybe he can fix you up."

On the train to Boston, I ate the chicken sandwiches my mother had packed for me, and daydreamed about Aaron, with a mix of romance and anxiety. I imagined myself drinking Screwdrivers at the Harvard mixer, speaking clever words which made him laugh. There I was, next, frozen in stupidity, no words coming to my lips, while his intellectual friends talked smart and fast.

I shifted in my train seat, looked out the window, and focused my dreams on the coffee house where Aaron said we'd go after the mixer to see his favorite folk singer. I'd be safer here in the dark, smoky café, drinking beer, holding hands with him across the small, candle-lit table, pushed close together by the crowds. The singer's voice would fill the air, making my words unnecessary. Aaron would kiss me, perhaps, once or twice before the night was over. He'd ask me back to Harvard, maybe, for another visit, a weekend even.

I see the real Aaron, now, through the yellowing lace curtains at the window, rushing up the steps of Margo's porch. My face flushes as I open the door and he enters, stiff, tugging at his tie, his gray suit jacket. He's as handsome as I remember although his delicate face has unfamiliar curves and shadows. And I'm reminded that we've met only once before at Paulie's party. But the silky hair falling on his forehead, those long-lashed brown eyes, the full lips are the same.

I smile, say “Hello,” touching my hair and the pearl buttons at the neck of my sweater one last time to see that everything is in place.

Take me out, I’m thinking. Take me out of here.

Margo jets to the door. She tilts her head, gives her best smile, shakes Aaron’s hand and holds it. I grab my new spring coat and purse off the living room chair. “Ready,” I say, sounding cheerful, stepping toward the door.

But Margo pulls Aaron deeper into this grim, furnished living room. “Stay for just a minute,” she says as she dashes out to the kitchen. “I’ll get some of this marvelous onion dip I just made—you know, the sour cream with the onion soup mix? Great with potato chips.”

“I don’t know if we should...,” I stutter to Margo’s disappearing back.

“I guess it’s OK, for just a minute,” says Aaron, glancing at me, at his watch. He lowers himself into the scratchy orange and brown plaid chair next to the coffee table, littered with Margo’s mass of leaflets, magazines, books.

Clutching my coat and pocketbook, I sit on the bulbous arm of the matching chair on the other side of the table. I pull out my Pall Malls and light up.

Not known for her hostessing skills, Margo is back, nonetheless, in record time with a tray of dip, potato chips, and bottles of beer that she snaps open with her church key.

“Here. Let’s have beers before you go,” she says, handing one to Aaron, and slapping mine down on the coffee table near me. “It’ll be fun, Susie,” she says. “Relax.”

She flips off her black flats and settles in the middle of the worn brown couch, one leg under her, the other crossed over, straining her tight black skirt. Her bare foot, the toenails painted deep red, points toward Aaron, who sits on the edge of his chair, tasting a chip, his eyes lowered. Margo lights a Camel, blows several smokes rings, one of her special abilities.

“So, tell me. How do you like Harvard?” Margo asks my date. “What courses are you taking? Anything with Professor Ronkowsky? I hear he’s fantastic. How about Nelson Rothberg?”

Margo loves to talk. She talks from her perch on the couch, waving her arms, waving her cigarette. She knows a lot about Harvard. She knows a lot about everything.

“No, I don’t know them,” Aaron answers, bending his head back to take a long gulp of beer.

“How about Bert Blanken? Do you know him? He’s a law student there. I’ve been dating him. I’ve dated a lot of guys from Harvard. How about Bill Steiner? Jim Wentworth?”

I hold my position on the arm of the chair and try to catch Aaron’s eye. He fidgets with his cuff link and doesn’t look up.

“Wait ‘til you hear this album!” says Margo, getting up to change the record. “Listen to this!”

It’s Johnny Mathis. I know every word to every song. Patsy and I swoon to him back home.

Margo’s on the couch again, giggling, continuing the list of her dates. She nods her head forward so her eyes look up like Lauren Bacall. Her right hand plays with the short dark bangs of her pixie haircut, making comma-like twists on her forehead. She takes a drag on her cigarette and blows a few perfect smoke rings in Aaron’s direction.

Aaron tries the onion dip and smiles at Margo. “No, I’m sorry. I don’t know these people,” he says. “But I’ve heard of them.” He eats more dip and names the professors he does know.

I move off the arm and slump in the chair, light another Pall Mall, poke it around in the seashell ashtray, watching the ashes turn the pearly-pink inside to black smudges. I see a dog-eared book, *The Lonely Crowd*, on her table.

I fade from the conversation, isolated in the muggy air, but can still hear her nasal voice, rising and falling in the background. I can't keep up. I've never been able to keep up with Margo's talk. My headache is bad, and my sweater clings to my back and itches. The waistband of my "Wonderful Warnerette" girdle slices into my waist.

Margo's question wakes me. "How about Marcuse?" She's always talking about Marcuse although I don't know who he is.

"You know him, right?" she asks Aaron. "Herbert Marcuse. I've been going to his lectures at Brandeis. He's synthesizing Marx and Freud. Have you read his Eros and Civilization? It's fantastic!"

"Yes! I *have* read him," says Aaron, leaning toward Margo, his voice loud, animated. "He's great." He smiles big, gulps more beer, finishing the bottle. "We just discussed him in Poli Sci this semester." His cheeks are flushed. He turns and gives me a small smile, including me for a second.

I take this chance, force myself to speak, and suggest we go.

"I'll get more beer," says Margo, leaping from the couch, heading for the kitchen.

"Just one more quick one, OK?" Aaron says, looking at me for agreement. He settles back in the ugly armchair and loosens his tie, ready for more Marcuse.

"Come on, Susie," interrupts Margo, back in the room. "Don't be such a wet blanket."

On beer two, Margo sits at the end of the couch, closer to Aaron, her body bent toward him as she shows her intellect. She lights another Camel. I sip my first beer, but it tastes bitter. I riffle through Margo's magazines and leaflets, looking for clues as to what I might say. But Margo's words rush to fill the room--"repression," "capitalism," "true liberation." The onion dip smells foul.

I don't protest anymore. I hear little as the talk goes on. The air feels thick around me as if I'm underwater, dragged down by the undertow, locked in the seaweed, helpless to move or speak. But I can see Margo's tight blue sweater and her breasts, which stick out too far. I stare at her lips, lacquered in red, recently touched up in the kitchen, I'm sure. I see the red lips make words, swig beer, open and close in raucous laughter, and pout and purse when my date speaks to her. I watch from my far off water world as my sister entertains my Aaron Moss.

On beer three, or is it four, I look out the window. It's gotten dark. I decide to count the people who walk by, hoping that by twenty, Aaron will agree to leave. On twenty-five, I stop. I think about Patsy and wish I were back home with her, lying around in her bedroom, laughing, or eating English muffins at the Blackfield diner after a movie.

"You are simply the cutest," my sister is saying to Aaron. "Come over here. I want to see it closer."

I snap my head toward her. (What is it she wants to see? His shirt? His tie?)

"Take off your jacket. Come on. You don't want to go to that crummy mixer anyhow," says Margo.

I grab a "Ban the Bomb" leaflet from the table and read the first line over and over. Not one word registers. Tears fill my head, my throat.

Johnny Mathis croons , "Oh, how wonderful you are."

Aaron is on the couch next to her, his gray jacket flopped on the plaid chair. He's fumbling with his cuff links, taking them out of his shirt. He looks at me, then quickly turns away.

"You are such a nice-looking guy, you know that? So cute!" says my sister. "And those eyes!"

Aaron twists toward her on the couch, his left hand by his ear, blocking his face.

She's touching his cheek. She's sticking out her breasts. She's drinking beer. He's drinking beer. She wets her lips, takes his chin in her right hand and pulls his face toward her. She places her red lips on his nose, leaving a scarlet smudge. Aaron's half closed lids open wider for a second. Margo loosens his tie more.

"Come closer, closer," she says, pulling him by his tie. She runs her tongue over her lips and kisses Aaron on his left cheek, on his right cheek, smacking her lips loudly on purpose. Lip imprints stick on his face like a pattern for a racy Valentine's card. Margo speeds up, grabs Aaron's head with both hands, kisses his forehead, his cheeks again, then his lips. Amused by her wild game of spread-the-lipstick, she laughs in mock surprise at her handiwork. Aaron surrenders to the game, falls back, resting his head against the sofa top, his eyes closed.

"Margo..." I say. It comes out like a weak whisper, a last breath.

She doesn't look at me, doesn't answer.

I see only the back of Margo's head as she works on my date's face. I hear the smacking sounds. Now she lifts up her tight skirt, and I see her white fleshy thighs and her underpants as she straddles Aaron, then settles down on his lap, facing him. Aaron groans softly.

I watch and don't watch, see and don't see, imprisoned in my chair, stunned silent by this impossibility.

What I do, is nothing. It is past too late.

“Come on, doll,” Margo says, talking, talking, standing up, pulling Aaron by the arm up off the couch. She takes his hand and leads him toward her bedroom. His hair is mussed, his forehead sweaty, and his face smeared with crazy lipstick mouths. He gives me a squinty-eyed, slightly drunken, half smile, as if I’m one of his drinking buddies who understands his luck at hitting it big tonight. His shirt hangs out of his pants. His tie lies abandoned on the couch. They walk into the bedroom and Margo closes the door.

Soon, I hear water run in the bathroom off Margo’s room. She’s singing, “Your lips cling to mine, it’s wonderful, wonderful.” I understand that I could move, right then, sneak into her room while she’s washing. But I can’t do it. I shouldn’t do it. What if she found me in the bedroom with Aaron? What if he turned out to be naked when I went in? What if she walked in naked? She might scream at me, turn on me, hate me. I’ve never defied Margo on something big before. I’ve been a good sister.

I sit in my chair, tugging at my hair. Everything belongs to her, I think. She’s always eaten up all my parents can give, sucked up all the air in the family. I’ve understood. Her needs are great. She’s the one with the important things to say and do and the biggest anxieties, even sickness. I gave up this fight long ago. But her taking this boy, my boy, this day, takes too much, slashes inside my skin, right into my heart, inside my very self, the only place that belongs to me since she has everything else.

It is not OK.

The bedroom door is closed, the water still running. I drag myself out of the chair, order my sea-soaked body to move. Legs leaden, I compel myself toward the door, force myself to open it.

In the dark space, lit only by the light from the living room, Aaron lies on his back, his arms behind his head, naked except for his white underpants. I tiptoe up to the bed, which seems too small, like a cot, and kneel down in the half dark, sickly close to the bare chest and skinny, white legs of this boy I don't know. I can smell him now, the beer on his breath, his sweaty underarms, faint Old Spice.

I plead. "Aaron, please, couldn't you leave? It's just not right."

My date answers, "No."

"Please," I say, crying now. "Don't do this."

"I'm sorry," he says, his words slurred.

I stand up quietly, turn and walk out, closing the bedroom door behind me.

I move toward the apartment door, open it, and step out onto the splintery wooden porch. Tears stream down my cheeks onto my sweater as I sit on the front steps and lower my face to my open palms. This is the face of a girl cut up the middle, then cut into pieces so small she barely exists.

* * *

Shock

Summer 1962:

My father calls from the office. I'm expecting it. I answer in the kitchen, where I'm eating a ham and cheese sandwich and studying Chinese.

"Bring Margo in at three again, today," he says.

"OK," I say.

Now at 2:30, I sit in the driveway in my stifling car, waiting. I hold my *Beginning Chinese* book open on my lap, staring at the odd characters I have to memorize for tomorrow's quiz. I point to each character and practice the sounds. "*Jia*," I say. "*Xie*," "*Xin*," "*Chi*." Impossible to memorize. The sounds connect to nothing.

On "*Zhi*," my sister and mother appear in the driveway. In slow motion, my sister gets into the car. I put my book on the seat between us, and urge my hand-me-down Ford station wagon out past the stone posts that guard the entrance to our house, and turn right up the hill. Through the mirror I see my mother in her green dress, waving goodbye from the driveway, a speck of apparent green cheer.

My sister, Margo, thinner than usual and certainly less fashionable, wearing a floppy, pink cotton blouse with capped sleeves, and old, blue summer slacks, slumps in the seat next to me. "Where're we going, Susie?" she asks, her nail-bitten fingers rapping on the window sill.

"To Daddy's office?" I say, my jaw clenched. "I told you before."

"But *why* are we going?" Her voice is small.

My chest tightens. I light up a Pall Mall, and reach for the radio dial.

“For a treatment,” I say, as I gun up Dogwood Hill Lane, barely looking at the large homes, which usually impress me.

I can't get myself to use the "s" word, the real word for what's going on. What would happen if I actually said "shock"? I am my family's family member, after all, and we're trying to pretend that this isn't happening.

Almost too late I see the red light at the top of the hill and slam on the brakes. *Beginning Chinese* flies off the seat and lands under the gas pedal. I bend to retrieve it, and drops of sweat from my forehead splatter over the book's new cover. “Damn it,” I say.

I'm home from college this summer of 1962. I'm lucky, at least, that four hours each morning I go to summer school at Yale, a half hour's drive from our house in Blackfield. When I sent in my application on a whim last January, Chinese seemed the perfect thing to study. Russian, my previous language of choice, had lost all its mystery once I figured out how the alphabet worked, and the words became mostly understandable. Something obscure and wondrously hard to decipher was what I longed for. (Did I think that if I could figure out this enormous language puzzle, real life's difficult pieces might fall into place, its mysteries be easier to solve?) In any case, when my mother isn't up to it, I'm available twice a week in the afternoon for my family duty, these sojourns into downtown Bridgeport to my father's office.

Something has gone wrong with my sister. Her post-college, independent life in Boston has somehow fallen in on her. My parents thought she was doing well—working for a progressive TV station, organizing with Women Strike for Peace, dating smart Harvard grads she bragged about in her letters home. But then she ended up in a psychiatric hospital in New Haven, staring at the wall, unable to talk.

"Am I going for a treatment?" my sister asks, as if she hasn't heard me. I turn to look at her but can't stand to meet her eyes.

I stare at the red light and say "yes" in a soft voice. I'm trying to do this right, do my job, do what I'm told, and make it through. I'm hardly aware that my jaw is clamped tight, that I yearn to close off this day and others, slam shut the gray steel doors in front of my heart and across my forehead, and feel nothing.

The light changes, and I take off down Grand Avenue, the pothole-filled street with the big name, bumping along past my friend Patsy's ugly, yellowish brick synagogue, Rodolph Sholem, past her uncle Phil's dental office, past the pink stucco house at the corner of my dreaded ex-piano teacher's street, my left hand grasping the wheel tightly, my right hand searching for any music that will fill up the space. But I can't help thinking about Margo, who's smoking now, gazing out at Grand Avenue with a dead stare.

Despite her erratic, often crazy behavior of the last few years, Margo still has an enormous pull on me. Although I'm away at college from September to June and far from her, barely an idea comes from my mouth without passing through the "What would Margo think about this?" filter. Even my handwriting is an imitation of hers, and when I doodle, it's her name I find myself writing over and over, thinly disguised in Cyrillic script.

But she's also been my heartbreaker, my real enemy, my fear, this Margo, especially when she seduced my date in Cambridge five years ago. I've tried hard to forget this painful event, to bury it so deep I barely remember, but in my dreams, the sweet-smelling boy who holds me and whispers he loves me always seems to wander off, holding hands with the other girl, the real girlfriend, who inevitably shows up. And the sound of beer cans opening and the shock of

large red lips still loom in my nightmares. Being with Margo back then was a heart-scarer, as it is now.

But, she is me, this person, slouched in my car with no memory, no lipstick, lost power, and stringy, unwashed hair. Since where she begins and where I leave off is pretty unclear most of the time, it's even more frightening for me that she's gone crazy, again.

I have little idea what's really the matter with her, or how she ended up at home like this. Why this depression now? My parents are no help. Other than telling me to take Margo for "treatments" and watch over her afterwards, they don't discuss her sickness with me or with anyone I can see. And I don't ask. I don't talk about it, either, not to my friends, not to anyone. The message is clear: It's not OK to have a crazy person in the family.

I have some ideas, of course, because I live here. "God damned therapist!" my father rages over and over. (*The breakdown is the fault of my sister's Boston therapist, and/or she shouldn't have sent Margo to the Yale/New Haven Psychiatric Hospital.*) "God damned hospital!" he shouts to my mother as she silently scrapes the carrots, sets the table, brings him a ham sandwich in the TV room at night. "Family therapy? What a crazy, god damned suggestion! (*The hospital staff was stupid, incompetent, and had no idea how to treat my sister. They would have let Margo be depressed forever. And asking my father to be in therapy himself was outrageous.*) My sister laments incoherently and often, "He shouldn't have done it, Susie," without explaining what she means. She always tells me parts of things as if I already know what she's talking about (which sometimes I do.) (*My father shouldn't have taken her out of the hospital and brought her home against her wishes? the doctors' advice? Or was it something else he did?*) In any case, I know enough.

As we enter the crowded streets of Bridgeport, I wipe off the sweat dripping into my eyes, light another cigarette with my old car's still-working lighter, and drive past the white wooden building with the four Greek columns, slightly sunken down the hill, of Miss Rohmer's all-girls dancing school, a scene of much happier days for my sister and me, where I danced the hula to "Blue Hawaii" in a blue cellophane grass skirt, and had the lead part of the princess on my toes, even though I had a 102 temperature, and pushed my too-long bangs out of my eyes every time I did a pirouette and faced the back of the stage, sure that no one would notice. My sister was the rabbit in Alice in Wonderland, dancing light-heartedly in her red and white bunny suit with the checkered vest, and in later years was a dashing prince to Pat Barnaby's princess.

We were close then, my sister and I. We loved this dancing, (hated our piano lessons), and performed our new dances for each other on the slate patio in the backyard on Liberty Street. On summer days we sat up in the thick branches of our small cherry tree, giggling, telling secrets about our friends, scheming against our parents, eating the luscious fruit. These were the years when we shared a bedroom and tickled each other so gently at night.

Too soon I turn the car onto Tyler Terrace and drive up to my father's office--a rather handsome brick house on what must once have been a classy residential hill, Silver Hill, to be exact, overlooking downtown Main Street and Lead's Department Store, now a place we avoid or visit carefully because (although no one says this directly to us) we know there are lots of Negroes there. In any case, my mother and father are so proud of this office, their second great acquisition during my teen years. The first was our stone house on Dogwood Hill Lane, a mansion compared to our earlier house on the more working-class Liberty Street. And now this—a second house bought and turned into an office. How far he's come, my father must think, from being the destitute medical student my mother met in Boston, who had to walk home from

her house in Brookline after their dates, too poor to pay for the trolley. How far he's come from being the poor son of a Jewish immigrant farmer in northeastern Connecticut. This can't be taken away, he must feel. Two houses.

I, too, am not immune to this power of wealth. As I turn into my father's driveway and park behind his huge gray Lincoln, the only shred of good feeling I have is a flash of my special privilege, parking in a spot reserved for the "doctor's family."

I grab my book bag and Chinese book, and Margo and I escape from the hot car. There's no relief outside though. It must be 100 degrees. The sun blasts down on us. My sleeveless blouse is soaked through and sticks to my back. My scalp is dripping.

As instructed by my father, we enter through the back door into the office kitchen--an old-fashioned, yellowish linoleum sort of place with a rounded porcelain sink--where sometimes, for lunch, my father eats chicken sandwiches with mayonnaise made by my mother, here at the small white enamel table.

I leave my sister sitting at this table and move quickly through the door into the big living room/waiting room where, in the small side alcove, behind glass doors, his secretary, Miss Dimints, sits. "I'm here," I say, "with my sister."

I'm always embarrassed when I come here. I feel I'm supposed to know this middle-aged blondish woman better. She's been my father's secretary forever. But it's an alien world to me, my father's place, and I am my own kind of shy person. My father never talks about his work at home, and I know nothing about it. All I've ever had to do, since I was a kid, is answer the phone during dinner, ask, "Is this the service?" and tell them my father will call back.

In fact, this office, despite my pride in our new riches, has often been a frightening place for me, even in better times. It's too heavy, red, and claustrophobic, despite all the redecorating

and re-covering of the original antique furniture. There's a mammoth red and cream striped satin settee, a ponderous armchair in some dark, floral print, an elaborately carved wooden staircase that belongs in a Jekyll and Hyde movie set, drapes designed to keep out all light, and the ubiquitous reddish oriental rugs. Not where I want to be.

I recover my sister from the kitchen and lead her upstairs. She is starting to whimper. I wish she wouldn't do this. "Come on," I say, not taking her hand. "It'll be OK."

A few minutes later my father, immaculate as always in his light blue seersucker suit, comes into the small room where we wait. "Are you ready?" he asks Margo, his tight lips caught between a smile and a grimace. Margo, who's been sitting with her head down and eyes closed, now rises, not looking up.

"Let's go," he says, taking hold of her forearm and leading her out to the shock room down the hall. There's supposed to be some other man who's giving Margo shock, but I haven't seen him yet.

I search now through my over-stuffed book bag and pry out my pad of yellow paper, my pen, and my cigarettes. I light up a Pall Mall, take a big drag, and place it in the ashtray on the small coffee table. Then I hold my pen over the pad, which rests on my knees, balance the book open on my sister's empty chair, and stare at the characters. The air grows thick and protective around me, and cocoon-like, I pull into the comfort of my study mind and the obscure text. My heart slows, my jaw relaxes slightly, as I copy the character for "tell"—The left part has a "mouth" with symbolic words flowing out. On the right, an "ax"—an odd combination for "tell." I don't get it. The power of the word? Sharp like an ax? I write it in my immature Chinese scrawl ten times, trying to follow the all-important correct stroke order.

Next, I study the pictograph for "roof," and how to combine it with different elements to change the meaning. I scratch in the "roof" on my pad, then draw the character for "woman" under it. Oddly, this combination means "peace." An old-time idea, I guess. The little woman, safe under the roof at home, and all is well. But it's easy to remember, although now I see that the "woman" I've drawn is too angular, all elbows. I write the character again ten times.

I struggle with the symbol for "pig." It looks frilly and fancy, more like a skinny bird wearing a fright wig. When this so-called "pig" is drawn under a "roof," the whole character means "home" or "family." A sign of prosperity in ancient China, says our instructor, Mr. Chin, pork to eat, right in your house, or a pig to sell at market. It's a lucky family, indeed. I love it. I write it ten times.

My father rolls in a cot with Margo asleep on it. She's covered with a light blanket. "Sit with her until she wakes up," he says, "and let me know if there's any problem. If not, just leave when she feels ready."

And he's gone.

I study a few more characters, but now the air seems brittle-thin, and I'm nervous. The character for "write" is impossible to remember, even though this one's got a "magpie" in it, a real bird under a "roof." But it looks nothing like a bird, really. More like a monster, or even a pig.

Eventually my sister comes around, groggy, and I manage to lead her down the stairs and out through the kitchen. She looks like a pale, bedraggled sleepwalker. I open the car door, hold her elbow, and maneuver her into the car, although I'm uncomfortable touching her body. I back out of the driveway, move slowly down Tyler Terrace, and Margo starts to gag, an aftereffect of the shock. I'm terrified that she will throw up in the front seat, although she hasn't done this yet.

Once before, though, I had to stop the car by the side of the road and let her throw up onto the gravel of Grand Avenue. But now she's slumped back against the seat, her eyes closed, and it looks like we'll make it O.K.

We follow the same route home. My sister doesn't talk much. I smoke my Pall Malls, listen to the radio, and go over in my head the characters for "tell," for "peace," for "family."

* * *

At home, I lead Margo past the kitchen, where my mother is slamming cabinets, and take her up to my bedroom. She is staying here with me, sleeping on the opened-up couch in my alcove, to be closer to my parents, I guess. She's not left alone anymore in her own bedroom with the engraved gray bed, once the prized, isolated place down next to the kitchen.

Margo, dark circles under her eyes, wanders around the room, muttering about her hairbrush, saying the same words over and over. I bring her to her bed. "Lie down, Margo," I say. "Go on." And she does.

I am used to being alone here, hiding out in my large room with the light green shag rug, and the white and green wallpaper I chose, with the birds clinging to the weeping willow branches. But now I have nowhere to go with myself but outside. After putting my sister on her bed, I throw my sweaty clothes into the hamper, put on my bathing suit, and go down to the back yard with my Chinese book. I'm relieved to be done with Margo.

Late summer afternoon, the best time to be in our yard. The long sweep of bright green grass slopes gradually downward to the small, natural-spring pool, shaded by several huge beech and oak trees. Near the house, I move the blue canvas chaise into the still-hot sun, and settle in, surrounded by my things, laid out on the grass--sun lotion, sun glasses, Chinese book, yellow

pad, red pen, black pen, cigarettes, matches, ash tray, old flash cards, scissors and paper for making new ones, a glass of iced coffee. A good breeze blows across the yard.

I write my new characters on flash cards and their strange sounds on the opposite sides. I write the character and speak the sound, write the character and speak, write and speak.

My eyes close, my head falls back on the chaise, cheeks raised to the sun. I drift, thinking about tomorrow's class, anxious about the quiz. Now I picture the drive into New Haven at 6 a.m. when the sun is just rising and the sky lightens and pinks so. I think about this fellow student, John, I invited myself to have lunch with the first day of class because he knew where the cafeteria was and I didn't, and how good it is that I forced myself to make this brave move. We've been eating together every day since. It's not a romance, for sure. He's a Christian, a real one, on his way to China as a missionary, I think, with a devoted fiancé somewhere in Ohio. But for now, he's my friend, my close buddy, even though I haven't told him about my family life, my sister.

A car door slams. My father. I snap open my eyes, grab my pens, and stare at my Chinese book. He strides out onto the lawn and stops near me, squinting into the late afternoon sun, looking up at the drainpipe that hangs precariously from the roof.

"How's Margo doing?" he asks, still staring at the drainpipe.

"OK, I guess. She's been upstairs all this time," I say, writing my characters, not looking up, hoping it's the only interchange.

And it is. I hear my father's footsteps up the back stairs, and I know I won't see him until dinner, after his scotch, his nap.

My mother comes out, still in her green cotton dress decorated with tiny stars and quarter moons, and moves a chair over next to mine, holding an iced tea, and her newspaper. She looks thin. "Want anything from inside?" she asks. "More coffee? Some cheese and crackers?"

"No. Nothing," I say, hoping she too will go away. I know she's only taking a short break while the roast cooks. I try to look busy, scratching my characters.

She opens her *New York Times* and starts to read.

"Pa" I say to myself, the sound for "fear." The character is made from a "heart" symbol combined with the picture for "white." Ah, the heart of white, the pale heart, the shocked heart, frightened into whiteness. I get this. I get this.

* * *

More Than Blue

Early February 1987:

It's dark when I step into Margo's hospital room this late winter afternoon, the lights not yet turned on. The smell is the usual mix of ammonia, fresh flowers, and old cafeteria chicken. But the air is unusual—thick, tense. Margo sits in the big chair by the window, a small blanket thrown over her shoulders and her thin hospital gown. She rocks back and forth in this sturdy chair, her upper body stiff. My mother, sitting next to her, leans in, holding her hand. Wads of Kleenex and sections of the *New York Times* litter the floor. Margo, who's rarely cried in front of us these past months, (trying to be a "good sport," she told my mother), is sobbing. Her cries match the rhythm of her back and forth movements.

She looks up at me and wails, "Susie, I'm going to die. The doctor said so."

"Her doctor came today," my mother tells me quickly, "and said there was nothing more he could do for her. Can you imagine?" She rubs Margo's back. "The nurse just gave her something to calm her down. It should start working pretty soon."

I drop my many bags on the floor (filled, as usual, with new paperbacks for Margo, unsigned power of attorney forms from her bank, my karate *gi* and belt, Ben Gay, nail clippers, ace bandages, surgical tape for my toes, and my lesson plans), and throw my heavy parka on the bed. I grab the extra folding chair from the corner, sit down on the other side of Margo, and grasp her left hand (aware that this is something I rarely do).

Surprisingly, she doesn't pull away. "Oh, what will happen? What will I do?" she cries.

"We're here with you Margo. "It will be OK," I say, although I have no idea how this could be so.

We sit this way in the darkening room, my mother and I straddling this terrified Margo, clasping her hands in our laps, as if we could somehow hold her steady, tie her down safe, like a small skiff before an oncoming storm. “Holding on for dear life,” I think.

I catch my mother’s eye. We’ve known for a long time that Margo would not make it, that this day would come. But we didn’t expect it to be like this. We are, in fact, at a loss, so unprepared.

Margo stops rocking and sits up straight, pulling her hands from ours. “I know what I’ll do,” she blurts out. “I’ll get shock! Tomorrow, I’ll ask the doctor if I can get treatments. Otherwise, I’ll break down again. I can feel it,” she says, cupping her free hands over her eyes as if to hide from the miserable truth.

“Good, we’ll ask him tomorrow,” says my mother, replacing the blanket, which has fallen off Margo’s shoulders.

Her whimpers turn into louder moans. My mother and I reach for her hands again just as a nurse appears in the doorway, a scowl on her face. “What’s happening in here?” she asks in aggravation, for we are, indeed, guilty of breaking the “everything is under control” hospital code.

I raise the palm of my hand toward her, signaling “stop,” and shake my head. “Not now,” I say, waving her away. I’m alarmed at my chutzpah as she leaves.

I’m conscious now of trembling in my chest, my hands and legs. How frightened I am by Margo’s loss of control. How insubstantial I feel, a mere outline of a person, a shell without enough inner resources. My mother and I are so alone—two people in charge who know so little about what is best to do. (When do you get practice helping a sister die? watching a daughter die?) The self-help books I’ve been reading on death and dying don’t help at moments like this.

I look out at the dark sky, the lights in the buildings across the river, the lights on the bridge, ordinarily so magical, and wonder how I can calm myself, calm Margo.

I close my eyes, reach far inside. My alternate, Asian-arts persona kicks in, the part I mostly submerge when with my family, (except for that slippage with the Chinese pill.) But it's the only place I know to go.

"Of course," I think. "Meditate."

"Breathe in," I tell myself, and I watch my breath sweep slowly in, feel it's coolness flow down my throat. The nurse bangs bedpans in the hallway. "Breathe out," I say, and follow my breath as it flows up out of my lungs. I sense my mother moving, and open my eyes. She's crossed the room to get Margo cold water from the pitcher by her bed.

"BLUE!" It comes to me. I'll try blue. How could I have forgotten these meditations I learned last summer at the Therapeutic Touch training? I'd gone for a week to Oakville Center, a spiritual place in upstate New York, where the especially attuned, much farther along this path than I, (too far, in fact, for me), confessed to seeing fairies dancing in the garden. I was on one of my searches for a new, post-karate career—a less war-like, noisy, and bruising path, where I could touch people gently instead of punching them in the solar plexus, and could be touched kindly in return. After so much death and illness, it's been increasingly hard for me to bark at my students, "Kick harder! Punch faster! Turn quicker!" I hate to yell, "Let's hear that *kiai!*" Their shouts hurt my head and make me more nervous. What I yearn for these days is a lifetime alone under a mound of quilts in a silent room made of cotton balls.

I know little about this Blue technique, but what else can I do? I'm thankful, at least, that Margo and my mother cannot see my brain, for certainly they would think I was nuts.

Margo cries, blows her nose, drops Kleenex on the floor.

I close my eyes again, clasp her hand more firmly, and picture the deep blue-ish-aqua color I remember being taught. I imagine this color streaming down through Margo's head, infusing her upper body with this dense blue, this warm blue, calming her, then moving out through her shoulders and down both her arms, blue, blue, down into her right hand and into this left hand, and into the fingers that I'm holding now. I keep the blue in all her parts and think, "Calm, Calm down, Margo. Blue, Blue." I move the blue down into her belly, down into her hips, her legs...

"Oh!" cries Margo, in a piercing shout. "How will I do this? Oh, the children?" Tears stream down her bony cheeks.

Now I'm crying too. So is my mother. It's a moment all right—the three of us joined in this agony. But at least we're joined, I think, holding on, trying to make OK what can't be OK.

I blow my nose. Maybe blue is a mistake—used for healing, not calming? Perhaps it's gold I need.

I take Margo's left hand in both of my hands. "It's OK," I say, visualizing golden light streaming in from the ceiling, coming from the heavens, the universe, the god I don't really believe in, full blown light, down through her head, her neck, into her chest, her heart.

Margo's crying slows, her rocking slows. She's closed her eyes, appears drowsy.

"It's the pill," my mother says, suggesting we get Margo to bed. We help her out of the chair and hold her elbows on each side as we walk her to the bed.

"Rest," I say to Margo as she lies down. "It's important to rest."

She closes her eyes, lies still. I have no idea whether it's my efforts or the pill (I would bet on the pill), but I'm thankful for whatever's calmed her down. My mother looks at me, nods toward the door, and we leave the room.

"Oh, God," she says, as soon as we're a few steps down the hall. "What a horrible, stupid doctor! Can you believe anyone would be so stupid? Just telling her like that?"

She's right, of course. A clumsy man. But, I'm thinking, at least he finally told her. He might have done it poorly, but Margo has to know. She has to know that she is dying.

The next day, I am dreading my visit. I arrive ahead of my mother. When I walk in, Margo is sitting up in bed, alert, all intensity, Margo, heightened, the square root of Margo. It's living in her now, the idea that she will die.

As I take off my coat, she says, "I can't have shock, Susie. The doctor says I'm not strong enough." He'll try some new medicine instead, she says.

The red-headed nurse comes in to take some blood. Margo is upset, not wanting to give blood now, and hating the way this particular skinny nurse can never find her vein. "What for?" Margo asks, not expecting an answer. But she complies. The nurse jabs at her hand and the blood flows out.

* * *

Words

Winter 1963-Spring 1964:

Her thigh muscles ached as she walked up the steep hill from his apartment toward Collegetown and the Cornell campus as she'd done many times that summer. The straight blue skirt strained against her legs and sweat dripped down her sides, soaking the thin, lacy blouse she'd bought many summers ago on a trip to Mexico. When she'd dressed that morning, she'd chosen these clothes, hoping to make herself feel good, but it hadn't worked. She thought to herself, "Stupid, ugly, fat."

An acquaintance noticed her climbing the hill that summer, and told her years later how much she'd admired her—this pretty graduate student, short and slim, looking so cool with her stylish clothes and her long hair braided neatly over her shoulder. "You were coming from the apartment of that gorgeous Greek boyfriend of yours. I envied you so," the friend had said.

She'd moved in with this lover down the hill, the foreign student, earlier in the summer. Before that, in the spring, she'd been unable to write. She'd sat day after day in front of her typewriter in Collegetown, trying to start her thesis.

Everything was there on the creaky oak table in her bedroom, spread out around her lounging cat, Louie--the neatly stacked index cards, her piles of Chinese and Russian novels, Chinese and Russian dictionaries, and textbooks on totalitarianism and Party control. She's spent months comparing fictional Party cadres, trying to unwrap the mysteries of these powerful but secretive Communist parties and crack the code of Sino-Soviet politics.

But the right words weren't there. A whole day would go by while she searched for the opening sentence. She'd write three words and scratch them out, write four words, and scratch

them out. She'd smoke her Pall Malls, twist strands of her hair around her fingers, and eat potato chips. She'd write six words, feed her cat, cross them out, write four words, play solitaire, cross them out. Hours went by. After lunch she'd try again, but it was always the same. She needed the first sentence before she could go to the second. Now she'd even lost the main point of the thesis. What was she proving anyway?

Each night she went to bed with no first sentence. And each morning she got up with dread, pretending that yesterday hadn't happened. Weeks of exactly this had gone by. Weeks.

She'd asked no one for help. Not her parents, who called her every month to see how she was doing and if she needed money. Not her older sister, Margo, who'd been out of touch since her last breakdown, and was now packing up to move from Cambridge to New York. In front of her roommate Carla, a nice person who'd taken to reading mysteries non-stop when she wasn't at work, she felt humiliated, sensing that Carla knew she had no sentence yet.

Sometimes in the morning when she first placed her fingers on the typewriter keys, she found it hard to breathe. Her left leg had also gotten that creepy, numb feeling she'd had a few times before, but didn't understand. Her frightened head was full of screams, but she pretended she didn't hear them.

Only from despair did she finally appeal to the boyfriend. "Could I try your house?" she asked, near tears. Perhaps if she got away from the old table, her bedroom, Carla, and the cat, she could jolt her dull brain and force a good sentence on to the page. (Would he even learn to love her?)

He let her move in. Or stay there, might be the best way to put it.

The morning after the move, in his rather dirty kitchen, she wiped off the sticky stains on his green formica table, washed out the chipped blue coffee cup she found in the sink, and set up

her notes, her typewriter and her cigarettes. At least the apartment was spare. No distractions. No solitaire cards. No Carla. No Louie.

After the boyfriend left for the campus library, she tried again. And they did come, some words, more words, an almost acceptable first sentence, and a second. Right away, they started coming. She didn't question why, and was afraid to hope for much more. They were just a few words, after all.

But in the days that followed, she made more sentences, and left some on the page. While a mound of crumpled paper grew on the cracked linoleum, paragraphs also took shape on her paper, building their way down the page. It was tedious, tedious. But as the days passed she wrote page two, and page three.

At night, sometimes he came home early, and they walked up the hill to eat in the coffee shop near her apartment, the one where the jukebox had been playing the new song she liked—something about holding hands. But often she ate alone, scrambled eggs, French toast, hamburgers—the few things she knew how to cook.

Lately he'd been coming in at 2 or 3 in the morning. It pained her, but she felt she had no control here, no right to demand more. And he made no effort to treat her as someone to whom he owed anything kind, like words, about when he would be home or how she was doing, even.

Once during the day, she ran into him in the campus cafeteria near the small lake, a place where she'd always liked to study. She'd gone to read over her newest paragraphs, and there he sat, drinking coffee with an unknown-to-her-pretty girl, the blond silky-haired type. When he saw her, he'd said her name, "Sooo-zie," with those exaggerated, drawn-out vowels he sometimes used, a sound of surprise, as if she were a person he knew but hadn't seen in a long

time. “Sit down,” he offered, pointing to the chair opposite him, next to the blond. He said nothing to show they were lovers.

She left fast, busy, on her way to somewhere. “See you,” she said, smiling, like a carefree girl, even protecting him by not revealing that she was the girlfriend living in his apartment.

“This isn’t happening,” she said to herself as she walked toward the bridge over the gorge, a painful knot in her throat.

One night, not long after, with her four typed pages resting neatly on the kitchen shelf, she lay in bed waiting for him to come home, and felt on the edge of going crazy. It was all too much. The air was too much. The sheet was too much. Her heart was beating too fast. She flattened her palms against her chest, pressing hard, but it didn’t slow her heart. She was hot, too hot, sweating now, throwing the sheets off onto the floor, her nightgown onto the floor. And now the top of her head, the part that kept her brain in, had loosened somehow and her mind was spiraling out in thick, brownish swirls. Control was seeping out. She was terrified. She could hear herself whimpering from somewhere far off. She grabbed the top of her head with both hands, pressed her face into the pillow, and tried to hold on to her brain.

It was just a matter of time, she thought, hours even, and she would be gone—crazy like her sister Margo, who had already lived so many sad years. She imagined herself the next day—a person with a nervous breakdown. She knew what that looked like. She’d seen Margo at her most depressed.

Suddenly she understood what would happen in the morning. She’d have to take charge of her own demise. She had no one to do it for her. She’d be the one to call her parents to come get her. She’d have to pack her own clothes. She’d have to live with them in Connecticut or in a

hospital nearby as her sister had done. Or have shock treatments at her father's office, just like Margo. And be crazy at the same time. The horror of it struck her. Having a breakdown would be even worse than where she was now. She couldn't do this. She just couldn't.

These few minutes made a difference. She lay in bed, rocking herself from side to side, her hands rubbing her scalp and her sweaty hair, roughly stroking her sad cheeks, and gradually her fragile skull seemed to close over with a delicate thin membrane. The terror subsided some, her heart slowed, and she slept.

When he got into bed at four in the morning, she started to cry. When he asked her what was wrong, she broke into sobs. She couldn't speak, sure he would loathe her more if he knew the truth. He wasn't one who liked weakness. He turned his back to her and slept. She cried quietly until it got light.

In the morning she felt deadened and tear-soaked, but her brain, worn out and bruised, had settled back inside her head. She packed up her four pages, her typewriter, and her clothes, and moved back to her apartment up the hill, knowing this would be the only way to save herself.

It was an odd little place where she and Carla lived, designed by the landlady to be quaint, cheerful. It had certainly once been an attic. When you entered this apartment on the 4th floor of the small building, you were faced with another set of stairs, at the top of which was a decorative wrought iron railing and what looked like an old European café--three white ice cream chairs, a small, imitation marble table, and a tiny lace-curtained window. Along the entire wall up the staircase was a mural of rolling green hills, a winding river, an old-fashioned regatta,

and serene women onlookers in long white dresses, sitting under umbrellas--a scene to be gazed upon, she guessed, by those eating in the little café, their dining room.

These were the very stairs the boyfriend had climbed more than a year before, in the spring of her first year of graduate school, the year after she'd spent the summer at home, studying Chinese and taking care of Margo, who was getting shock treatments for her latest breakdown.

Yes, she told Carla, she was lonely, but she couldn't stand going out alone to parties or bars, flirting with men, trying to meet someone. It was too hard, too painful in the outside world, too much what her sister had already overdone, especially when she was sick. "Couldn't some guy just come right here? I mean right here? Is that too much to ask?" she joked to Carla one day as they ate English muffins for breakfast overlooking the regatta.

The next week, he came. Right there. Knocking at the door below, walking in and speaking up the stairs to her at the top—a handsome young man, tall, slender, with wavy, thick brown hair, glasses, and a strong accent to his English words. He was looking for Stuart, Carla's Greek-American boyfriend, or even Carla. But they weren't home. There was an immigration crisis, and one of his Greek student friends was locked up in the town jail right then, arrested for visa violations. He needed Stuart's help.

"Want to come up and wait for Carla?" she asked, unlike herself—not one to invite strangers in when she was studying, or even when she wasn't.

"OK," he said, gliding up the long stairway, two steps at a time.

They moved to the living room and settled down with coffee on the shaggy green rug since the afternoon sun filled the floor with light and warmth on this cold day.

He was so afraid, he told her, that his friend, Aristotle, (Aristotle!) would be deported. She tried to calm him, saying she was sure Stuart could help. And he relaxed some. He took off his thick, tweed sweater, revealing a slimmer body than she'd expected. She brought him a second cup of coffee. They talked of her Chinese and Soviet studies, his graduate Engineering classes, his hometown in Salonika, Greece, her hometown in Connecticut, her father, the doctor, his father, the anti-Nazi, pro-Communist partisan, her name, and his amazing one, Xristos Hadjitheodakis—the X pronounced like some Hebrew letters she'd learned as a kid in Sunday school. He stayed much longer than he needed.

The tones turned sweeter and the words paced slower; their bodies moved closer and her arms uncrossed from in front of her chest. And there were more smiles, more often, and delight. He took off his glasses, wiped them on his shirt, and looked at her with his unguarded blue eyes. She was touched by his beauty, his fear, his foreignness, his accented language. She thought she could love this boy.

It was then they heard Carla open the downstairs door, and they rose reluctantly from the now shadowy floor to deal with the prison crisis.

A man had come to her, just as she'd willed. And he stayed long enough to give her hope that he would call again.

One afternoon soon after, while she struggled to translate a speech by Mao, he did. She answered the phone on the fake marble table.

“What are you doing, Soo-zzie?” he asked, giving a strong Z sound to her name, which she liked.

“Oh God, I’ve been translating Chinese for three hours, and honestly, I don’t care what Mao thinks about peasants. And I’ve still got history for tomorrow,” she said.

“Well, bring your books to my house, and we’ll study together. I’d like to see you. Want to Soo-zzie?” he asked.

And she did. She followed his directions and rushed down Collegetown’s main street, past the bookstore, her coffee shop, and her seedy laundromat, where Louie sometimes slept on top of the dryers, and then down the steep, winding streets to his apartment on the third floor of a small, wooden building.

They sat in his narrow, spare living room, pretending to study. The first hour they moved with their books from place to place. She first in the gray arm chair, he on the couch. Next she on the wooden chair and he on the rug, propped on his elbow. She then lay on the lumpy couch and after a while rested Terror and Progress in the USSR on her chest, unable to go on. He rose slowly from the floor, put his glasses on the table next to the couch, took the book off her chest, saying, “Soo-zzie,” softly, and stretched out his lanky body on top of hers.

They moved to his bedroom—a glassed in porch, open on three sides to the trees—much like the bedroom she remembered in Nebraska when she was three or four years old and felt so abandoned by her mother when she woke from a nap to find herself alone. But now she seemed so round, full, protected, as her new lover, only the second one of her life, held her after startling, joyful sex. This was so different from sex with her previous boyfriend Arnie, the nice Jewish boy from Long Island whom she’d tried to love for three years. He was loyal, kind, and probably would have asked her to marry him, but when they lived together one summer, she found she could not bear for him to touch her. She hated his bulging stomach in his too tight pants, his

sloppy haircut, his pale skin and eyes that were too close. But this didn't explain why sex with him felt like being locked in a coffin.

But she loved the touch of this new man. She grasped his arms that were around her now and stared at the bare tree branches striking against the windows in the cold wind, where she thought she wasn't anymore.

In the weeks that followed, they made love often for long hours, and studied together in his windowed room or in her thesis-cluttered bedroom. He always knew when to call for a movie, just when she couldn't translate one more word of Chinese or read one more Soviet novel. "Want to see a mystery at the Near Near?" he'd ask. "I'm leaving in five minutes." (It was either that or the Near Far, the Far Near or the Far Far—the four movie theatres stretched along the main street of the small town.) And she'd rush down the stairs to the waiting car he'd borrowed from Aristotle, delighted for the chance to be close to him for a few hours in the dark.

On her most anxious days, she'd walk alone up to the Vet School to see the rows of huge pigs suckling their white-pink babies—a sight that gave her joy. On his cranky, money-worried days, times he'd smelled badly from not enough money to clean his tweed sweater, his only sweater, he'd sit withdrawn in his living room while she'd make Greek coffee in that little golden pot—chocolate brown suddenly foaming over the edge and spilling into his tiny, white coffee cups. She'd listen to his barely articulated sadness and anger about being a foreigner in this country, so poor, not fitting in. And she would hold him.

But gradually as the months passed, at times like this when she tried to listen, to understand, to offer advice or money, his lips would curl up in a sneer the way her father's had when he'd disapproved of her. Xristos would speak his most angry words, the loaded words.

“You, Soo-zie, an American.” “You, Soo-zie, a rich girl.” And his most favorite invective, “You, Soo-zie, a ‘liberal!’”

It bewildered her. Her heart hurt and her eyes teared up. “What’s wrong with being a liberal?” she’d ask. She’d always thought “liberal” was a good thing, her parents’ legacy to her—a belief in justice, support for the downtrodden. Hadn’t she been sympathetic toward the Civil Rights protestors she often saw on TV? She’d even picked up brochures about that new Peace Corps project. “Tell me,” she’d say.

“You won’t get it,” he’d answer.

She just wanted to be loved, held, that’s all, by this lover in his glass bedroom. But as time went on, he hurt her more, and she cried all the time. He started to call her “stupid,” again, just as her father had done. He became more distant, denied his secret girlfriends, gave her lice, and then mocked her with words of sarcasm, “Poor Soo-zie, so unhappy.”

They fought more and broke up gradually without ever using words to define it. But after her near breakdown, after she’d moved her thesis and typewriter out of his kitchen and back to her own apartment, she’d felt cut free.

He came to her just one more time a few months later. She was sitting in her small café, proofreading her finished thesis she’d just gotten back from the typist when he knocked on the door below. He walked up her apartment stairs, and she could see through the railing, against the bucolic backdrop that he wore an old-fashioned, mustard-colored three-piece suit. His apartment had burned down with all of his belongings, and someone had loaned him this outfit. And of course, although she thought he looked silly, he carried himself so straight, so proudly.

He lay on her bed, fully clothed, his long legs resting on the floor. He told her the story. Something about his fault, a cigarette, falling asleep. She wondered what girl had been with him. And finally, for the first time, he made a request for money. “A small loan,” he said. “I’ll pay you back.”

She felt sad for him, and wrote a check. “Don’t worry about it,” she said.

They waited awkwardly, not knowing if they should reconnect with sex—it had been so long. But they did. She started by rubbing her hand across his heart, trying to comfort him this final time.

But then it was the yellow suit on again, all three pieces, and he was gone.

* * *

My Race Wars

1965-1966:

Many believe that racism can be dealt with effectively in one hellifying workshop, or one hour-long heated discussion. Many actually believe this monster, racism, that has had at least a few hundred years to take root, grow, invade our space...this mind-funk that distorts thought and action, can be merely wished away. I've run into folks who really think that we can beat this devil, kick this habit, be healed of this disease in a snap. In a sincere blink of a well-intentioned eye, presto—poof—racism disappears. “I've dealt with my racism...Hallelujah! Now I can go to the beach. --Gloria Yamato, “Racism: Something about the Subject Makes It Hard to Name” (in Rothenberg, *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, p. 85)

Two tough girls on a train. That's how I see us when I look back. Two tight-jawed young women, speeding toward Blackfield, Connecticut from Grand Central on a mission. It was Spring, 1965. My older sister, Margo, had news to deliver to our parents, and I'd said I'd support her. We didn't know what to expect, but in case of a skirmish, we were armored.

We were riding, though, with more than a united front. As we sat facing each other, our feet up on opposite seats, I was reading an SDS pamphlet on American killings in Vietnam, and Margo was underlining sections of her James Baldwin essays with her red pen. We young women, 24 and 28 years old, were traveling with a strong sense of righteousness and the support, we felt, of thousands of radical college kids and civil rights workers. It was our time, our

revolution time, time to fix the century-old inequities in American society and end the cruel war in Vietnam. Margo and I were in the center of these struggles.

I was working at my first post-college job in Washington, D.C., writing abstracts on arms control for a Government agency. But in the last few months I'd wolfed down my lunch hour sandwiches between chants on anti-Government marches and picket lines. I'd limp back to the office, my feet blistered in my high heels, my blouse sweaty under my blue wool suit, and my picket sign mashed up in my pocket book. What joy I felt "marching against myself," as I called it to my friends. In March, I'd gone on a terrifying overnight "Freedom Train" to Montgomery, Alabama to support the Selma-Montgomery voting rights marchers. Just this April I'd joined the largest ever Anti-Vietnam War March on Washington. Margo herself (much more stable mentally than she'd been a couple of years ago) had worked a short time in a Mississippi Freedom School the year before and was now organizing for Mobilization for Youth, a new poverty program on the Lower East Side of New York.

As the rickety commuter train sped toward my parents, for all our bravado, Margo and I were fearful. I puffed one Pall Mall after another and bit my cuticles at the same time, repeatedly dropping my pamphlet on the soda-sticky floor. Margo kept slamming her book shut to check her face in her compact, smearing on more fuchsia lipstick each time, as if the coating would protect her.

What would our parents do, these educated, liberal, solid Democrats? Verbally, they supported Civil Rights, but this news, we feared, would be too much, especially for our rigid, volatile father.

I'm halfway out of the kitchen already, hands full of silverware, when my sister starts. She and my mother are sitting at the kitchen table, slicing vegetables for the dinner salad. As usual, I'm on the periphery in the family, close enough to hear what's happening, but far enough away not to be too involved. Margo has so intensely grasped my parents' attention that long ago I dropped out of the competition. Today is no different. Although I'm listening to every word, I slip in and out of the kitchen, setting the table in the dining room next door. I've already done the candlesticks, the dried-flower centerpiece, the place mats.

"Ma, I wanted to tell you that I've met a guy I really like," says Margo, her voice a little wavery as she tears off pieces of iceberg lettuce and drops them into the wooden bowl.

"Oh, that's terrific, dear," says my mother, meaning it, chopping her green pepper.

"His name's Alfie, Alfie Pearson. He's a photographer and artist, and he works for McGraw Hill as a book designer. A really good job."

"That's nice, dear," says my mother, positioning the pepper slices in the salad mix.

I'm back in the kitchen, counting napkins, slowly.

"Well, you might be upset about this, but you should know something. He's a Negro. Alfie is. But from a really nice family, educated and all. I've even met his mother," she adds, in a desperate effort.

My mother keeps chopping, but slows down noticeably. I'm taking down five water glasses from the cupboard, one at a time. I catch my sister's eye.

My mother stops cutting.

"Oh, that's interesting dear," she says in her automatic, nice-parent voice. She drops her knife, wipes her hands on her ruffled apron. "Excuse me a minute," she says, and walks out of

the kitchen to the TV room where my father watches football. The TV sound is lowered. We hear my mother's voice, my father's voice. We can't make out the words, but we fear them.

In 1965, nice, white, Jewish girls from middle-class suburbs don't date and marry Negro men.

At dinner, the discussion starts. I'm in my usual seat, on my father's left. I keep my eyes tight on my food and cut my lamb chops into miniscule bites.

"You're not thinking of marrying this guy are you?" my father asks Margo right off, his voice high-pitched, just short of yelling.

"Well, I'm not thinking about it now. I just said I was dating him," she says. "But I've been seeing him for awhile." Margo is gutsy.

My parents hear it. That it's not impossible Margo might want to marry this Negro man.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" screams my father, crashing his drink down on the table, splattering small drops of scotch on my right cheek. "Are you crazy? What the *hell* are you thinking?"

"Now, Marty" says my mother. "Calm down. She only said she's dating him."

"Oh, shut up, Ruth," says my father. "She can't marry this guy! What the hell do you know about him anyway?"

My mother is wounded, as she often is at the dinner table. She says nothing, and leaves the table to get butter, anything. My dinner roll sticks in my throat.

"I thought you were such great liberals!" Margo yells back. "I thought you believed everyone was equal! Didn't you teach us that? When did that idea go out the window?" she asks, sounding as though she might cry.

“She’s right,” I force myself to say.

“So, you’re in on this too!” screams my father, glaring at me with a force that makes my head feel frozen. At least I’ve spoken up, taken sides.

He tells us to eat and be quiet. And we obey.

Margo and I finish the dishes and sit alone in the kitchen, eating pie and smoking. “God, Susie. What do you think they’ll do next?” she whispers, unconsciously twirling the hair near her temple into a tight spike.

My mother enters with awkward, heavy steps. “I just have to know,” she blurts out, “What does he look like?” Her voice is low and mean, an unusual tone for this genteel, soft-spoken woman. “Does he look like Martin Luther King?”

“Jesus, ma!” says my sister.

Margo and I know what she’s asking. Exactly. In 1965, King is not viewed by whites as he will be in later years—a comfy national hero, celebrated with school holidays and made-for-TV movies. He’s famous at this time, but as an agitator, more often in handcuffs than at the podium. But a son-in-law in jail is not what’s worrying our mother.

This night, my educated, cultured mother has conjured up, we are sure, an image of what “*The Negro*” looks like, and that is Martin Luther King. Here is a man with nappy hair, broad cheeks, big, unmistakably Negro lips, and a wide flat nose. The quintessential Negro stereotype. What my mother is expressing at the very deepest level are her racist fears about Alfie. “Oh God,” she is saying, “Is Margo’s boyfriend really a Negro, I mean, a real Negro, in the worst sense, with all the darkness, danger and inferiority that implies?”

“No, he doesn’t look like King,” I say. “But this isn’t the point, ma.”

Margo and I get the point. We've heard it, the pure racism at the heart of my mother's question.

Later that night, after the TV is turned off, as I climb the stairs, running my hand along the delicate green and gold wallpaper that I helped my mother choose when we first moved into this large house, loud wailing comes from my parents' bedroom. I rush to my room, put on a record, turn the volume up. I'm not used to this kind of noisy tempest. Turmoil in this house is usually more subdued. One quick yell from my father, and the issue—whatever it might be—is finished. The suffering, if there is any, is done in silence. Despair moves inward, becomes depression.

As I start to undress, my father walks in. "Listen, . . ." he says. My mother, in her nightgown, bursts into the doorway behind him, a wild woman with hair disheveled, arms outstretched, face distorted. She's screeching, "Noooh! Noooh!" and words I can't understand. My father blocks her before she makes a full entrance and pushes her out of my room.

I can't move. Did I really see this? My mother, like the crazy wife in *Jane Eyre*, escaped from the attic. The family secret, out. I've never seen my mother like this. At most I've witnessed her quiet weeping over my father's anger or a dead family pet. But she rarely loses control. It seems, however, that Margo's Negro, Alfie, has driven her over the edge.

Suddenly my father is back. "Your mother's upset. Talk to Margo, will you? See if you can put some sense into her head!" he says and slams the door.

I burst into tears. It's also more than I can take.

By the time Margo and I leave on Sunday, family appearances are normal. My mother's hair is back in place. Plain speech has replaced her moaning. No one mentions last night, and we

pretend it never happened. “We’re only thinking of your welfare, Margo. How society will treat you,” my father says.

“Consider the children,” says my mother.

“Use your head for a change, will you, Margo?” says my father, losing the reasoned approach.

“Absolutely,” says Margo, sarcastically.

“And Susie, don’t egg her on!”

I grit my teeth.

II.

Margo and I were hurt and furious. We’d feared my father might react this way, but facing his red-faced anger and his solid contempt for Alfie was terrifying for Margo and me. My mother’s fleeting breakdown and her Martin Luther King questions were entirely unexpected.

I remember my thoughts at the time: So racist! I was thinking. What hypocrisy! Hoodwinked! Bamboozled by my parents. Suddenly, my whole upbringing seemed a sham; my parents were nothing more than puppets, mouthing falsehoods. Hadn’t we children been taught to respect others, to believe all races were “equal”? As Jews, knowing about the horror of the Holocaust and experiencing anti-Semitism in the U.S. ourselves, weren’t we obligated not to practice hate against others? Yet now I saw with dismay that the lessons had all been pretense. What my parents really meant was, all people are equal as long as they don’t want to marry our daughter. (A cliché today, perhaps, but a newer, more shocking idea, in 1965.) Now I understood what “liberal” truly meant—*Phony!*

America and its hypocritical propaganda was no better, I thought, teaching us year after year to put our little hands on our hearts and murmur, "...with Liberty and Justice for All," yet not meaning a word of it. The Government had promised "equality" to the Negroes, but was doing almost nothing to enforce it. I knew I was seeing the true, undressed United States for the first time, and it was a dirty picture.

Margo and I, speeding back to New York on the train, felt unique, that we alone had experienced such a dramatic awakening. But in fact, our journey was very much a reflection of the wider movement in the country at the time. Civil Rights workers in SNCC (The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and CORE (The Congress of Racial Equality), and northern white radicals in SDS (Students for Democratic Society), were becoming increasingly disenchanted with the Government and the liberals' ability to make good on their promises. One reporter at the time wrote, for example, that Tom Hayden of SDS "seems to be moving closer and closer to a position that the liberal establishment (if not all liberals) constitutes the most dangerous enemy we confront."¹

Margo and I saw ourselves as brave, somewhat battered and frightened, but standing tough against the mean forces of reaction.

We couldn't have done much differently, for we were young, and caught up in the movements around us. And we were, indeed, on the side of right, as far as Alfie was concerned. Yet, as I look back at those days, I understand that there was much my 24-year-old self didn't see and couldn't see at the time. And I have some regrets.

I couldn't let myself feel sympathy for my mother. I saw how the race issue drove this normally composed woman to a quick madness, and it truly frightened me. But I quickly blocked it out, hid it from myself, just as my father had pushed my mother from my room.

I couldn't see that Margo and I used the race issue to fuel our own private uprising--a rebellion against my father's authoritarianism and my mother's passivity and weak veneer of civility. On this weekend, my parents had come out as "the enemy" in the race wars, and unconsciously we would get back at them for every perceived wrong they had ever done to us.

My new-found revolutionary zeal also blurred entirely my own conversion in the race wars, just a few months earlier. When I turned in hatred against my parents in 1965, I forgot that I too, in many respects, had been as troubled by race as my parents were, that I too had been imbued with what Gloria Yamato calls the "mind-funk" of American racism against African-Americans.

It had been only a year before, in the Spring of 1964, that Margo had first told me about Alfie.

III.

Margo and I were in Puerto Rico at El Moro castle, standing side by side, gazing out at the warm sea, arms resting on the heavy stone walls that guarded the Spanish-built castle in Old San Juan. On this first day of the spring vacation Margo had urged me to take with her, she told me that she'd met someone.

I remember Margo looking so pretty then, the sun strong on her face, her silky, straight brown hair, so different from my floppy curls, blowing lightly across her flushed cheeks. Her long-lashed brown eyes seemed dreamy, sexy. Her often blemished skin was unusually clear and smooth. The turquoise sundress wrapped tightly around her small waist while her full skirt swished in the strong breeze. I admired her looks. I wished I had her height, her figure, her eyes.

“He’s a Negro,” she told me in much the same way she would tell my mother a year later. But for me she added in, proudly, “He’s so handsome. And so political! Can you imagine? He’s even met Malcolm X a few times in Harlem!”

She asked me what I thought. “Really, Susie, tell me.”

It was certainly a shocker, even from my sister, a person always pushing the boundaries, out ahead of everyone else, in ways good and often not.

What did I think? I felt my body stiffen. I had no words.

I wasn’t ready, just as my parents would not be. For the last two years, I’d been a graduate student in upstate New York, studying Sino-Soviet Comparative Government. These days I was hard at work comparing Communist Party political control strategies. I spent my days reading current Chinese and Soviet Party-approved fiction, stories of heroic workers battling dissident conspiracies in coal mines, rice fields, and mountain villages. If fictional Party cadre Ping Xiao Wang grappled with the dissidents differently than fictional cadre Ivan Andreyevitch Kolishnikov, then, thought my thesis adviser, we could unwrap the secrets of these powerful Communist Parties.

In my own way, I suppose, I was slightly off-beat, like Margo, although I didn’t think of myself that way then. In these post-McCarthy, Cold War days when Communist Russia and China were “evil empires,” it was unusual for someone who wasn’t a spy to study the language and politics of these enemy lands U.S. citizens weren’t even allowed to visit. But I loved escaping, if only in my head, to these dangerous foreign places so remote from my mundane life in suburban Connecticut and upstate New York.

I wasn’t offbeat, though, in Margo’s real-life, on-the-streets kind of way. American race issues were new to me.

I was just becoming aware of the race turmoil in the country. If one had a TV in 1963 and '64, it was, in fact, impossible to miss the Civil Rights Movement. The struggles by Black people to register to vote and to integrate segregated lunch counters, schools, buses, even water fountains had become lead stories on national TV. Historian Todd Gitlin has commented that in 1963, according to one estimate there were 930 civil rights demonstrations in at least 115 cities in 11 southern states.²

At night, after my work was finished, I did watch these events on the black-and-white TV evening news. It was the Blacks' non-violent tactics that captivated the reporters, and me. I watched as Black adults and children, neatly dressed in Sunday-best suits and ties, dresses and stockings, sat-in, non-violently, or marched, peacefully, for these simplest of demands, while white sheriffs like Bull Connor of Alabama loosed police dogs to bite boys' ankles and hands, jabbed cattle prods into the backs of ministers, and blasted fire hoses which lifted large men off their feet and slammed them into trees. Civil rights workers were shot dead on back roads or in their driveways, with impunity.

I was sickened by the brutality of the police and moved so by the courage of these civil rights workers. I remember on a visit home in August '63, sitting teary-eyed with my mother, hearing Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial. And when John Lewis, another civil rights worker, yelled into the mike, "Wake up, America. Wake up!!!"³, I felt that I was doing just that. I was waking up to the Black people's situation, sympathizing with their need for "freedom now." For the first time, I was truly seeing, as were so many other northern, white liberals at the time, what had been going on for centuries in the South. I understood who was the "enemy" and who was not.

Yet, while I truly supported this struggle I watched on TV, I wasn't ready for the Movement to leave the South and burst into my life by way of my sister. Margo's dating a Negro was asking me to go much farther in my head than I had ever gone before.

"What do you think, Susie?" Margo asks.

We move from our seaside overlook to an outdoor café nearby. As we order the coffee with steamed milk and some *flan*, a custard Margo's heard about, I feel a wild jumble of emotions, thoughts.

--God, this is frightening! The truth is I've never known, really known a Negro in my life, except for a maid we had when I was about ten. But I didn't know her well, and can't recall her name. And I've never really gone to school with Negroes. Well, yes, there was the one high school student, Hamilton Wilson, the only non-white person in the entire Blackfield High school, whom everyone (including me, I'm ashamed to say), called Hambone, (although I never called him this to his face as some others did.) My girlfriends and I always taunted each other with jokes like , "Oh, Patsy's boyfriend is Billy Rordash," (the chubby, sad, white boy who always sat behind me in class) or "Gail's got a date with Hambone next week." It was cruel, and that's what we did. And yes, I remember now, in 1958 my freshman year in college, out of an entering class of at least 1,000, there was only one Negro girl, and she was missing an arm. How uneasy I was when I sat near her in the dorm dining hall, feeling she had a huge double burden. I couldn't imagine how she was surviving.

In truth, I am afraid of this unknown. I do not know what it is like to be with a Negro as a peer, as a friend This is one of my fears, although I would have been embarrassed at the time to admit this to Margo.

--Margo's love affair itself terrifies me. I can say "yes" to integrated lunch counters and voting rights, but the thought of a Negro/Caucasian romance makes me shudder. I know to the core that here in 1964 it is not all right, in the South or in the North. I know that in the South if a Negro man winks at a white woman, even by mistake, he risks being shot in the head and thrown off a bridge. I know this. I don't know what would happen in the North because I never see any mixed-race couples, but I'm sure it's not safe, although probably not deadly. People on the streets, in the subways and restaurants of New York will be revolted by my sister's actions, and furious at her, and Alfie. And certainly me, if I am with them.

--*Damn! This is just like Margo!* I'm thinking. Plunging ahead in life, whether it's dangerous or not, acting crazy, even being crazy, and frightening me with her behavior. It's more than her out-front politics. She's been reckless since her teens when she was nabbed with her girlfriends by the police for throwing rocks through windows and painting dirty words with red paint on the walls of newly-built houses on a dead-end street. She's had bouts of true craziness, the nervous breakdowns in college, and less than two years ago I spent my summer driving her to her shock treatments because of her severe depression. And there has been her promiscuous sex and the illegal abortion in Pennsylvania that only Sally Bromberg and I know about. And usually, Margo has invited me along on her out-of-control sojourns, even if I didn't want to go, to care for her, witness her actions, cover up the truth, lie to our parents, and support her, no matter what. And I've done this, for she, my sometimes tyrant-sister, is a force I cannot resist. I've often hated her for this.

Isn't this romance the same wild, nuttiness?

--Yet as I sit in the San Juan café with Margo, who lounges back in her rattan chair, grinning, sipping her coffee, in this air that feels so sweet and soft after Upper New York State's

horrid winter, I'm pulled too by the many gifts Margo's given me, if "gift" is the right word. She's been my mentor, my trendsetter—the person who taught me how to ride a two-wheeler, how to draw the hopscotch pattern on the road with chalk, how to spin on ice, how to fix a pageboy hairdo and tie silk scarves around my neck the way she did, how to fix bra straps and straighten seams on my stockings, how to wear lipstick and pluck my eyebrows, how to drink beer and smoke. Without her I wouldn't have known about Dave Brubeck, Harry Belafonte, Mel Torme, Tom Lehrer, Stravinsky, Bartok, Camus, Sartre, and DeBeauvoir. Although I won't be aware of this for many years to come, even my majoring in Government clearly stems from my wish to hold my own in a political argument with my father, as Margo has always done. I've been too afraid of him. And most important, perhaps, she's challenged my father and taken on his wrath, diverting his attention away from me. "...I had her before me always/like a shield," says a Sharon Olds poem about an elder sister. Her "clenched jaws, her frown-lines...are/the dents on my shield, the blows that did not reach me," says Olds.⁴ This too is what Margo has done for me, and I am grateful.

She's been out ahead of me. She's gone first and known things. And I've admired her, needed her, loved her for this.

--What's more, at this moment, Margo's affair doesn't look like one of her plunges into madness. In fact, she's been feeling mentally well these last two years and seems happier in New York than I've seen her in years. Is this romance with Alfie...perhaps...*a plunge into righteousness*, instead? Sure, Margo's bounding ahead, reckless as ever, but this affair seems to be about justice, not delinquency? If she cares for Alfie, then she should ignore race, no matter what people think. If the Movement in the South means anything, it's that people should challenge racism everywhere. In truth, Margo is daring. Her audaciousness is awe-inspiring.

Margo is asking me along on another trip as her collaborator, her witness, her supporter. But this time, I sense, it might benefit me, too. She'll push me to do what's just. We'll be part of this new U.S. history. It might be a scary journey, as it often is with Margo, but we'll be "cool," (maybe "hip" is the word used then). My sister will force me to pull my head out of Chinese texts and Party fiction, to step away from the TV screen, and jump into real life. This, my sister can do for me.

--Finally, there's the issue of my parents, although there's only a hint of these ideas in my consciousness at the time: Certainly they'll be upset if they find out about Alfie. But how angry I am at my judgmental, harsh father and my passive mother, who supports him no matter what! It's just a whisper in my head, the words, "We'll get back at them."

So, when my sister says "What do you think, Susie?" I lean forward in my chair, drag on my Pall Mall, and say something like, "Well, geez, Margo, it's frightening, but if you really like Alfie, then you should keep seeing him." Mundane words, but big ones nevertheless. I've joined my sister again: a supporter, a witness, a troublemaker.

IV

Back at school, I organized and re-organized my notecards, wrote and rewrote the first lines of my thesis, and watched the evening news, keeping an eye out for Malcolm X since Margo and Alfie admired him so.

A few times I did see Malcolm on TV, addressing street rallies in Harlem. I heard him tell his admiring crowds that if the white man didn't "clean up his house," then his house "should catch fire and burn down." I heard him say to the Harlem crowd, "You are better than the white

man... Your skin look[s] like gold beside his skin..." Then he called the white man "nothing but an ole pale thing," and the Negro audience howled with laughter.⁵

Oh yes, I could see how charismatic, how smart Malcolm X was, but honestly, he scared me. He wasn't a turn-the-other-cheek kind of guy, as the non-violent southern leaders were. I suppose I was afraid for myself. But when Malcolm returned from a trip to Mecca in May of '64 and admitted to being impressed with the Muslim pilgrims "of all colors," not only the dark-skinned, I felt relieved.

That summer, I saw that whites, especially college students from the north, were getting more involved in the Movement. Two civil rights organizations, SNCC and CORE, trained and brought to the south 300 volunteers from the north, five-sixth of whom were white, for "Freedom Summer," a major voter registration drive in Mississippi. The situation was exceedingly tense, and the organizers expected violence. John Lewis in his autobiography of his civil rights years, *Walking With the Wind*, reports that in Mississippi that summer, there were more than 450 'incidents,' including a thousand arrests, eighty beatings, thirty-five shootings, thirty-five church burnings, and thirty bombings. Says Lewis, the "Klan was simply running amuck....with very little response from local or federal authorities."⁶

Even my roommate Carla gave up her mystery books to watch the extensive television coverage when the mangled bodies of three CORE organizers, Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman were unearthed in a dam on August 4. Everyone knew they were killed because they were registering blacks to vote, and the press went wild, especially because Schwerner and Goodman were white (much to the disgust of Blacks who rarely received similar attention when Black civil rights workers were killed.)

In late August, I decided to take a break from my Master's thesis work, so I packed my small bag and drove my corroded Ford station wagon into New York to spend a night with my boyfriend Xristos, who was returning from a visit home to Greece. But first I would finally meet Alfie, with whom my sister was now living. Although I was becoming intellectually ever more committed to the ideals of the Movement, I still had a long way to go on the personal race front.

I drove to my sister's apartment on 103 St. and Broadway, for Xristos's plane from Athens wouldn't arrive until later that night. Oddly enough, in spite of the huge racial significance this meeting with Alfie had for me, I have only shadowy recall of our first few hours together. There is a strong sense of how happy Alfie and Margo seemed together, and their apparent joy that I had come. I can also recapture the feeling of Alfie's lightness and warmth. I know that he turned out to be as my sister had described him—a smart, charming, handsome young man, slim and dark, but it's possible the clear picture I have in my mind comes from a later period in my life. I think it's from this first meeting, though, that I remember Alfie's huge grin and the endearing space between his two front teeth.

What remains in my memory with perfect clarity, though, is Alfie's apartment, and the twenty three-year-old me in it.

Alfie has offered me his place for the weekend since he's staying with Margo. Because Alfie is a photographer/artist, it's fitting that he has a "crib," as he calls it, in Greenwich Village, a place I know of in a hazy, romantic way. I recall Margo, Alfie and I walking down the narrow streets, past three-story, red brick houses, Italian groceries, outdoor cafes, where famous writers undoubtedly hang out.

When we finally reach the right building and climb the stairs, Alfie pauses before his apartment door. “Now, don’t expect too much,” and laughs. “This is New York. It’s just a studio.” I’m excited. I think he means “art studio.”

We enter into a narrow, one-room apartment. What registers first is that the walls are painted entirely black. BLACK! I have never seen anything like this. I am so conscious of race that all I can think is, “My God! A BLACK person with a BLACK apartment!” I am amazed, although part of me faintly realizes that it is not race, but Alfie’s artistic “hipness” that has led to this decor.

The place is minimal, neat, and I’m aware that Alfie has gone to trouble straightening up for me. He barely knows me, but is treating me already like a close friend, a family member. He shows me the tiny refrigerator, hidden inside a cabinet, with the milk, eggs and juice he’s bought me for tomorrow’s breakfast. A bag of fresh bagels rests on the counter top. I’m touched. Margo, too, smiles throughout the tour, so pleased with Alfie’s generosity.

When Margo and Alfie leave me alone to wait for Xristos, I unpack, hang up my few clothes, and go into the bathroom. I wash my face and hands in the little sink and turn around to dry myself on a towel. I notice the towels. The towels. All the towels that Alfie has neatly folded on the racks are BLACK! I stand before a black towel on the white towel rack against the white tiled wall, and for a minute, I cannot move. Embarrassed as I am to write this today, this is the conversation that I have with myself:

“This is a Negro’s towel Should I touch it? Well, don’t be ridiculous! Of course it’s clean. I’m sure Alfie’s washed these towels. Does black skin color come off onto towels? Maybe Alfie’s chosen these black towels because the skin color comes off on to them. Oh, God, Sue, you know this isn’t true. What kind of crazy ideas are in your head? Where are they coming from? These

are like those ideas about people having tails. Who is it that is supposed to have tails? Is it Negroes? Or is it Jews? I'm not sure. God! Why am I thinking this?"

I'm watching myself thinking these thoughts and am appalled. I'm aware that these are racial myths floating around in my head. I'm flooded with confusion, caught between these racist tapes that have been imprinted on my brain and the part of myself I see as the "good girl," the one who wants a new understanding about race, but in fact, understands nothing. I stand in the bathroom, in front of the towel, and stare straight at these myths. I know what the truths are, that Alfie is just another Human Being, but somehow I'm frightened to accept this simple fact. At the same time I'm embarrassed by these race myths in my mind. I'm glad no one is around to see into my head.

I want to be a brave new white person, like Goodman and Schwerner, like my sister, a person of conscience. But it's easier imagining myself on the picket line in front of TV cameras than standing in this bathroom. The towels are a challenge. However, in a second or two, Alfie's sweetness, and the truth which I know is the truth, win out. I grab the largest black towel on the rack and press my wet face into its sweet smelling center.

IV.

This towel incident has stayed in my memory like none other in my personal struggle with racism. (I've never told anyone about it until now.) Today I see this experience as my reminder of how very deep racism can go in the white heart (not a new concept, by any means, but new for me to have seen it in myself), and how very sick racism is—at its core, a belief that the person of the darker skin color is not, in fact, a true Human Being, but a sub-species, (who just might have a tail and whose skin color might come off.)

George Orwell, writing of his early years in an English boarding school, says, “Only by resurrecting our memories can we realize how incredibly distorted is the child’s vision of the world.”⁷ I feel similarly. Only by resurrecting my earlier memories can we see how “incredibly distorted” is the “vision” of race difference that I and many whites carry (or have carried) in our heads and hearts. Only by such acknowledgment can there be a cure. There’s value in admitting, “Yes, it was this bad. I thought this. This is an inside view of a nice, white, middle-class racist. This is the truth.” Gloria Yamato says to white people, “Acknowledge racism for a start....Work on racism for your sake, not ‘their’ sake.”⁸

But is this work still needed? Haven’t there been enormous, positive changes in the lives of African-Americans in the last thirty-five years? Indeed there have. “Why look at Colin Powell and all the African-American city mayors, Congressmen, CEO’s, Harvard grads,” people say. In my family, too, there has been much progress in the race wars. Margo and Alfie secretly married at City Hall in June, 1966, and two days later, my guilty, gift-bearing mother, in a surprising turnaround, arrived to take the couple to a celebration dinner. (My father, however, stayed home.) Margo and Alfie remained married for twelve years, and had two sons, Zeke and Danny, who were, after some difficult times, accepted and loved by both my parents. After Alfie died from a heart attack in 1985 and Margo died from cancer in 1987, I moved into Margo’s home to take care of Zeke and Danny. The situation was tragic, but most of the internal family race wars had been solved.

Much racism, however, still lives in the country, despite the gains of the last three decades and the myth that most racial problems have now been eliminated. “Like a virus, it’s hard to beat racism,” says Yamato, “because by the time you come up with a cure, it’s mutated to a ‘new cure-resistant’ form. One shot just won’t get it.”⁹ Sometimes, in fact, the form of racism is still

the same old one. Danny, a former professional basketball player and now a 35-year-old Public Relations Director in New York, stands on his street corner in his suit and tie, and cabs pass him by. Two years ago, Zeke, a 37-year-old Ph.D. candidate at the University of Texas, crossed the street in Austin, mumbling something to his friend about the loudness of a police car siren. Four white policemen, overhearing him, jumped out of their car, threw Zeke to the ground, rubbed his face into the cement, and beat him on the legs for “resisting arrest.” Zeke was exonerated in a trial but without a good lawyer, could have been sent to jail for years.

I write this paper for them, Margo and Alfie’s children. My nephews. My boys.

* * *

Endnotes:

- (1) Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Paperback, 1993), p. 166.
- (2) Gitlin, p. 129.
- (3) John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 224.
- (4) Sharon Olds, “The Elder Sister.” (1984) In *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 7th Ed., p. 1183.
- (5) Malcolm X, *Make it Plain* (Documentary film).
- (6) Lewis, p. 267.
- (7) George Orwell, “Such, Such Were the Joys...” (In *A Collection of Essays*), p. 46.
- (8) Gloria Yamato, “Racism: Something about the Subject Makes It Hard to Name.” In Paula S. Rothenberg, *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, 3rd Edition. (paperback). p. 88.
- (9) Yamato, p. 85.

* * *

On the West Side Highway

October 1966:

We drive back into Manhattan on the West Side Highway, you, quite pregnant, at the wheel of the sturdy Volvo Alfie just bought, your elbow out the side window on this warm, sticky afternoon, your silky hair blowing across your high cheekbones. You whistle along with the radio.

I squint out my open window, dragging on my cigarette, searching for New Jersey, which has vanished in the yellowish smog this late afternoon, even though it's a mere bridge-length across the Hudson River.

"Could you open another pack of crackers for me?" you ask, reaching over to change the station. "In the paper bag by your feet."

It's those unnaturally orange peanut-butter crackers I know so well. You're always snacking in the car, the same assortment every time—these orange crackers, McIntosh apples, and peeled carrots--as if you'd starve on the hour-and-a-half trip from our parents' house in Connecticut to our apartments on the Lower East Side. You've got a bad case of Food Fear, a Jewish thing for sure—eat while you can for the forces of evil might rally any second, throw us into a ghetto, feed us bread crusts.

I rummage through the pile of things at my feet—my heavy leather purse, two books, two magazines, an extra sweater, and a package of leftovers from ma—corned beef, roast beef, rolls, cole slaw, oranges, and old bananas.

"Why do you always need all your junk in the front seat with you?" you ask, not expecting an answer.

You are a pain. I say nothing. (I cannot see the mound under my feet as my own survival kit.)

I find the paper bag and pull out your snack. I bite open the cellophane package and hand you a cracker.

“Take one if you want,” you say. But I’m smoking my Pall Malls, and, as usual, starting a diet. I think of the three open buttons on my dungarees.

“No thanks. I’m getting disgustingly fat. I ate so much at home.”

You thrust the whole cracker in your mouth, and start in on me again.

“So what’s bothering you?” you mumble through your crumb-filled mouth. You look straight at me now since the traffic on this crowded, old highway has come to a stop. I watch the cop car’s swirling red light far ahead.

“You seem distant a lot of the time,” you say. “What’s going on?”

The smell of peanut butter wafts to me along with your question, competing with the damp, fishy/sewer smell of the Hudson.

What can I say? I’m not conscious of anything bothering me, other than the usual tension I feel after a visit with our parents, where your needs, as always, take up all the space. This time it was you and mommy together in the kitchen, talking, talking about your pregnancy, your bladder, your backaches, your foot aches, your food needs, and Alf’s needs. All weekend. But I’m used to this. I watch TV in the living room with daddy, and convince myself I don’t care.

We’re moving again, edging toward the George Washington Bridge, barely perceptible except for the fuzzy glow of its lights.

“Come on, Susie. Can’t you open up a little? It’s not good to keep everything inside,” you press on, as always. “You seem so locked up, so afraid to say what’s on your mind. It’s good

to talk, even if it's scary. I'm telling you, therapy has helped me so much even though I was afraid when I started. Freud says..."

"Freud, Schmeud," I say under my breath. I'm surprised this slipped out. I usually don't talk back to you like this.

"What did you say?" Your voice rises..

I turn toward New Jersey. I undo the long braid, which hangs over my left shoulder and rethread it, tighter.

You are Miss Therapy, Margo, is what I'm thinking. You with your "Freud this" and "Freud that" and Bruno Beetle-somebody you've been mentioning lately. Really, I don't know what you're talking about most of the time. And honestly, I don't want to. "Therapy" is not a word that brings comfort, Margo. It just brings memories of your breakdowns and shock treatments crashing into my head. And that daddy is a psychiatrist is one more reason I hate the word.

Leave me alone, please, is what I'm thinking, safe inside my skin, inside my head, hidden away. This is the only way I know to survive. I've done it, always. To "open up," loosen my tight lips, is the last thing I want to do.

"Talk, Susie!" you pester me. "Talk!"

I hate this. I bend down and ruffle through the things at my feet, grasping the package of corned beef. I take out a slice, roll it up, eat it with my fingers.

"Are you mad about the abortion?" you ask. "That I didn't go with you?"

“No,” I say, meaning it, sort of.

“I just couldn’t do it, Susie. I felt I wouldn’t be able to stand it, being pregnant, you know?” You rub your right hand against your protruding belly. “Susie, you understand, don’t you?”

“I understand,” I say, grabbing another slice of meat.

I do want to understand. You’re newly married to Alfie and pregnant with your first child. It’s a huge thing for you, and even me. I’ve never had a nephew or niece before. Yet, I was pregnant too, Margo. We were pregnant together, all last summer, although I didn’t know it then and couldn’t figure out why I felt so sick. I’d followed your path once again, only this time it was a terrifying mistake. And now I can’t even remember why I felt I couldn’t bear my life one more second without being held by someone, without having sex with someone, even if I took no precautions and got pregnant, even if my crazy choice was 17-year-old Nicky Gonzalez--the strange, artistic boy who’d lately been dropping by my apartment uninvited, asking if he could sketch me. He was one of the young Puerto Rican kids I’d been hired to save—tutor, that is, at the Lower East Side School Project.

It’s hard to admit, even to myself, that I might be mad at you about this, Margo. It’s too painful to absorb that *you* “couldn’t stand” my abortion, when I was the one in so much danger. And I was new to the city and had no one else to rely on. We had no idea even who this abortionist was. He was just a phone number from someone who knew someone. I’m the one who could have died in that kitchen horror, when the woman in the housedress held my legs apart while the abortionist worked on me. I had no anesthetic, and that ugly woman yelled at me for crying out in the unbearable pain. “Shut up,” she kept saying, “or he’ll stop right now. Do you want that? Just shut up!”

Yes, I was upset that I had to ask Turner, another teenager from the School Project, to drive me in his blue convertible to that secret place in New Jersey. They told him he couldn't park in front of that small dark house, so he circled the block for an hour until I dragged myself out the door and to the curb.

But the biggest part of me, Margo, wants to believe you're telling the truth—that you truly couldn't have handled it. And since you are my sister, I should protect you, too. After all, I have survived this abortion and seem to be physically OK. And Alfie did loan me that huge sum of money, and I'm so thankful for that. This is the version I want to believe—the version I have been living with in my head.

"I understand," I say to you, only half-lying. I fold up the corned beef package and light a Pall Mall. "It's not the abortion."

"Then what is it?" you ask. "I always feel there is some big barrier between us."

You are relentless.

Deep down, I know you're right. Although we see each other almost every weekend, and I moved to New York last spring just so I could be part of your life and your radical political work, there is a dead space between us—an invisible force field that separates you from me. It predates the abortion. And it's more than your taking up all mommy's time in the kitchen. If a photo were taken of us today, standing side by side, surely it would show me leaning away from you, (or you, leaning from me.) I don't know what it's all about. I never think about it. I don't want to think about it.

Or maybe I do know what this is about....

We're passing the huge cruise ships, docked here on Lower Manhattan. I feel my jaw clamp even tighter and wish I were off, this second, on one of these boats, for I sense you will probe without end until you drag IT out of my brain—the one big memory I try to forget.

“OK,” I say, forcing myself to be courageous. I do this for you, Margo, because you ask. To be the good sister you want me to be. I turn and face you.

“There is one thing I've never been able to forget,” I say. “That time you slept with my date....in Cambridge...Remember? Aaron Moss? He came to get me for a date. Remember?”

My throat feels clogged with a ball of acid. This event of eight years ago has never been mentioned between us.

“What are you talking about, Susie?” you ask, snapping off the radio dial.

“You don't remember? When I was in high school and I visited you in Cambridge? You kept kissing Aaron on the couch and then you took him in the bedroom and had sex with him!” My voice rises toward a scream. “He was my DATE!!! You don't REMEMBER?”

My yelling at you terrifies me. My hands are shaking and I'm crying.

You turn toward me, eyes wide. “THAT? That's what you're mad at me for? I can't believe it. Really?” you shout.

“Yes,” I mumble. “Really.”

“But that's crazy! I was sick, Susie. You know that. I didn't know what I was doing. I was SICK!” Your voice is loud, harsh.

Your words are deadly, Margo, and I will not forget them---all my life.

You badger me to tell my deepest hurt from you, and then you deny the deed a second time. Now, eight years after you tore this boy from me, you do not give me what I must have. You do not say, “I'm sorry.”

What exactly did you think you'd find by pressing me so hard?

I will not mention Aaron Moss again. I will not “open up” for you again. I will stay betrayed by you. You will remain unforgiven.

* * *

The Photo Op

Late February 1987:

“How ‘ya doin’, kid?” asks Aunt Jean, my mother’s younger sister, as she bustles into the hospital room, her tone jovial, her accent Bostonian. She wears the usual crisp white blouse over her ample breasts, a thin cardigan sweater, and a simple skirt over her narrow hips (her figure the opposite of my mother’s pear-like one.) A small barrette holds her straight, shoulder-length white hair in place. She’s just come from the train station for her first visit with Margo since she was hospitalized three months ago. I’m angry she’s waited so long although I say nothing and act pleased.

Jean bends over the bed to kiss Margo, who lies on her back under a mound of blankets now that she’s cold most of the time. Her pale face is all bone. Green oxygen tubes emerge from her nostrils. Just a few wisps of hair remain on her head.

“Not so good,” murmurs Margo, her eyes half closed. “A little less pain than yesterday, though,” she says, offering the best spin she can to meet the cheerfulness of her favorite aunt, the person she lived with for a few months after one of her breakdowns at Wellesley.

“Good,” says Jean, patting Margo’s hand. “Good girl. Good for you.”

Jean sits in the chair my mother has pulled near the bed for her.

“Wait ‘til you see what I’ve brought you, Margo,” she says, sliding photos out of a small manila envelope she’s taken from her purse—(the exact purse my mother uses, I notice, probably at Jean’s suggestion.)

My mother and I bend close over Jean’s shoulder to see the offerings. It’s a Lewin sister thing, bridging uncomfortable first moments together by sharing family photographs, mostly old

ones, recently retrieved from the bottoms of desk drawers or storage boxes in cellars and attics. (My mother has often greeted Margo and me this way when we've gone home for holidays.)

Jean rests a small photo, yellowed at its scalloped edges, on the sheet near Margo's head. "Look, here's Auntie Emma on the left, and this is Auntie Sadie next to her. They're some lookers, aren't they? And aren't these fellows handsome?" Jean laughs.

I see them, our great aunts, two sisters, just teenagers in the early 1900's, in blousy, ankle-length dresses, lounging close together on the grass, their long hair loosely swept up on their heads. Behind them are two young men, suitors probably, dapper in their jackets, ties, and straw hats.

Margo rolls onto her side and attempts to prop herself up on her elbow. My mother folds a pillow behind her back to make this easier. I watch Margo, trying so hard, it seems, to be a good girl--to please Jean, to not be a dying person. She smiles and mumbles through her tightly clenched teeth, "Oh, how cute. Yes, handsome."

Jean laughs and sets down another photo, this one with a large crack through its center held together by scotch tape. "Here's grandpa," says Jean, "with your mother at the beach. It must be at Nantasket. Right, Ruth?" she asks my mother. Grandpa Lewin poses in his one-piece, knee-length, black bathing suit with buttons up the front, holding in his arms, my mother, a small pouting child, who squints in the sun.

Margo can't sustain her posture and sinks her unsubstantial body down onto the bed. Her eyes roll back in her head, as has been happening the last couple of days, a sign, certainly, that she is getting closer to death. She misses entirely the next picture Jean lays before her—the blond cocker spaniel, the favorite Lewin family dog, Dickie, playing in the waves.

* * *

You Touch My Back

1971:

You held out your hand, Margo, and your fingers touched my back. Perhaps you were jostled by the crowd, pushed off balance, and used me to right yourself. Or was it that I stepped backward and bumped into your hand by mistake? Or perhaps you wanted my attention to point out some wicked slogan on a picket sign. (Was it my favorite: “A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle”?) We were, after all, gathering on East 59th Street and Central Park by the hundreds, thousands, many said, on this sunny spring morning to march down Fifth Avenue for Women’s Rights.

What I do know is this: You were not reaching out just to be close.

You yanked back your hand as if you’d scorched your fingers. “My God, Susie!” you exclaimed.

I spun around, alarmed.

“Your back,” you said. “It’s like a rock! Hard as a rock!”

There was more than surprise in your voice. I heard admiration—even awe—at how hard, how tight, my back muscles were. I’d been amazed myself at how strong I’d become ever since I’d started karate training at the all-male New York Gojukai more than a year ago. Lately I’d been admiring my thicker forearms, bulging thighs, and tighter stomach. But my *back*--a part I’d never thought much about. This too? I was delighted.

In your words, Margo, I heard even more—an acknowledgement that I had, in one way at least, transformed myself, become in your eyes, dare I say it, *substantial*. And your surprise reminded me that I'd done it on my own, without your direction, control,

In these seconds, I understood how I'd truly changed—forged my own path, one far different from yours. By joining this karate dojo and training several nights a week, I'd shot off into the radical fringes of this new women's movement you'd introduced me to. While you'd been exploring marriage with Alfie and motherhood with Zeke, and now Danny, I'd developed a fury at men and all institutions patriarchal. While you'd gotten pregnant, bigger, rounder, softer, more cautious, more stay-at-home, I'd become leaner, harder, more radical, less frightened, more on-the-streets. My goal was to emulate the ancient goddess Anath I'd recently read about, a woman-unto-herself—a tough broad.

You touched my back, Margo, and in your words, I heard fear, if only for a second, that in some small and unexpected way, I had surpassed you.

* * *

THE LANGUAGE LESSON

The Language Lesson

From the back row, I hear Rabbi Fried's squeaky voice as I watch his black-robed arm swing back and forth like a large bat wing, and I wonder how the strange marks he scratches on the board have anything to do with making language. Yet the boys in the front row, the obedient brood, nod their dark heads toward the winged one and make odd huffy sounds in the back of their throats. The proud Rabbi grins, exposing his small, pointy teeth.

I know these symbols on the board have names, but I recognize only two: the "Mem," which resembles a fat English M with a tail added, and the "Shin," shaped like a Viking ship with three prongs in the air--the high-curved prow and stern and the tall mast in the middle. It's where I'd like to be now, sailing out of this temple cave, off into the wind, led by a bold, blond, wooden mermaid, carved on the prow, as we crash through the waves toward the bright green trees and sunny beaches of Non-Jewish Land, where I'll understand the language and won't feel stupid.

But here I am at Reform Sunday School in the dank, windowless classroom of the temple basement, slouched in the back row, where the girls congregate, squeezed between Judy Greenbaum and Sarah Kaplan. We're supposed to be learning this Hebrew although the Bat-Rabbi never calls on us and doesn't seem to care whether we get it or not.

To be honest, we're not entirely without voice here in the girls' row--in Girl Land, you could say. We scribble hasty notes in English about movie dates, doodle hearts and arrows in our book margins, and whisper about our crushes on the new boy Stevie Savitt. But the Hebrew letters are a mystery and serve only as the substance of our favorite joke. Under our breath, we

chant the alphabet as it sounds to us: “Aleph, Beth, Veis, Gimme a Dollar, . . . “He, Waw, Zayin, Yuff, Huff, Puff and I’ll blow your house down.”

We crumple forward and slap our hands to our mouths to stifle the laughter. Tears drip down our flushed cheeks. We’ve flown out of the cave for a moment.

The Bat-Rabbi bangs his chalk on the old wooden desk, peering at us with his close-set eyes.

“Girls!” he yells. “Girls!”

We’re back in our seats, silenced.

Only once do I speak out to the whole class, trying to break through that invisible partition of Girl Land. It’s about the title of our new history textbook, *When the Jewish People Was Young*. I’m troubled by this incredible subject-verb agreement mistake and excited that no one else has discovered it yet. At home I sit on my bed and run my fingers across the title on this blue cover, saying over and over to myself, “People *was*?” “People *was*?” I prepare a small speech on grammar for the class.

The next Sunday, with unusual bravado, I flash my hand in the air, startling the Rabbi with my unexpected efforts. “Our new book has a mistake in the title,” is what I say.

“You’re wrong,” he says, swirling in his blackness, returning to his Hebrew lesson.

I do not speak publicly again until our Confirmation three months later. For this show I’m placed in the front row on the stage before our audience of parents, and I watch as cute Stevie Savitt and the rest of the boy brood, disguised now in dark blue suits and yamulkes, take turns reading from the Torah, miraculously blending those Hebrew letters and making words that roll and huff out of their mouths. We girls have been handed typed speeches, in English, pasted on cardboard and covered in plastic, yellowed with age. These are the words I will mouth as I

stand at the podium in my white organdy dress with the bulbous, white chrysanthemum corsage almost blocking my vision. Dutifully, I follow the written directions. “Today (look left) we are gathered together (look center) to celebrate (look right)....”

This too is a language with no meaning.

When Sarah, the last reader, has finished, I know we’re almost free. But the Bat-Rabbi, in an unrehearsed move, asks each of us to stand with him, one by one, at the back of the stage, before the open Ark. Those of us still seated can’t see what is happening behind us, can’t make out the Rabbi’s words. On my turn, I step to the back and face him. He lifts his huge wings and places his long, skinny fingers on my hair

“I want you to make three promises,” he says, squinting at me and pressing down hard on my skull.

Right now, while I’m in his clutches, close enough to see the pores in his nose, before the entire standing congregation, before the God I don’t believe in but think just might be watching in that brightly lit Ark, in that velvet and golden place filled with light where the Torah is kept, the Rabbi, after all this time, wants to have a talk. He craves my words, my blood.

I’m ambushed, blind-sided by this Bat-Rabbi. My throat closes up, my sinuses hurt, my legs shake.

Will I keep the Jewish faith forever, he asks. Will I raise my children as Jews? And finally, the clincher, will I promise never to marry a Christian? I’m stunned he could ask this of me, a 13-year-old, without warning, in a place where I cannot refuse. Secretly I cross the fingers of my right hand, and through clenched teeth mutter, “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

I escape home with my parents and shed my white dress. With it I throw off the creepy Rabbi, Judaism, prepared speeches, Hebrew and all foreign alphabets. I pull on my bright pink

shorts and blue tank top, grab the Sunday paper, and run out barefoot into the light-green of the back yard's early summer trees and grass. I lie back in the yellow hammock, which is stretched between our two tallest trees, and sway back and forth, as if on a ship, feeling the breeze, the warmth. I open to the comics—the only newsprint with color, the only section with few words and simple language. This is what I choose.

* * *

FACADES

Facades

When the tour buses finally pull up to our dorm on the outskirts of central Prague, we American tourists and our Czech student guides, huddled together in our layers of sweaters and ponchos on this cold, rainy summer day, rush to climb aboard. We complain bitterly about the weather, but know it's appropriate for this trip we're taking to Terezin (Theresienstadt in German), the former Nazi concentration camp for Jews, only an hour's drive from here.

It's my first trip to a concentration camp, but I've known about Terezin for forty years, at least. The information in my head is sketchy, though. It's something about Jewish artists and musicians interned there, secret operas sung in hidden basements, and Nazi attempts to create a dressed-up, stage prop city of Jewish "well-being" for the visiting Red Cross. In the 1960's I even owned a book, which I seem to have lost, titled something like *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*. It was filled with drawings by the children of Terezin, who were lucky enough to have crayons and paper and a teacher for a while, but were still exterminated by the Nazis. I remember showing these pictures to my sixth grade class of Puerto Rican children in Manhattan in the 1960's.

I do know that the Terezin we're visiting isn't a regular concentration camp, like Auschwitz. I don't expect to see row upon row of barrack-like buildings, hemmed in by barbed wire, watchtowers and mud. I know people lived there until the Nazis turned it into a ghetto where Jews were held until transported to the death camps. In my mind, Terezin has always been like a medieval Italian city, perched high on a steep mountain. The words "ramparts" and "moats" float in my head. I see stone houses that circle and rise up and up along winding cobblestone streets that end, perhaps, with a monstrous castle at the top.

I know Jews suffered and died here also, and certainly it was freezing on the mountain with barely any heat or clothing. But for some reason when I picture the prisoners up there, in the high city, in the clear air, with their subterfuge, their hidden fiddles, songs, and crayons, they seem heroic and pure to me. The Terezin of my mind has an epic, larger-than-life, fairy tale quality to it, although it's a gray-cold, evil fairy tale kind of place, where the resident ruler is the wicked Nazi king.

I take a seat on the bus next to the window, and my new friend, tall Melissa with the wild, dark hair, sits down next to me, although I'm so bundled up she barely has room. Since I'm always cold, I've brought more than most for this 2-week study/tour in Prague, and I'm wearing every warm piece I've got—my turtleneck shirt, two sweaters, a jacket, a poncho, and an old Mexican serape.

I'm glad Melissa's here next to me. She's a kind, warm woman, an English teacher like me with my kind of crazy radical politics. And she's 59 years old to my 60. Almost my twin, despite my short self and gray hair. I was worried about traveling alone to this summer program without knowing anyone, and I'm pleased Melissa and I have gotten close over the past week.

“So there I was, in Berkeley, at this meeting in a cafeteria,” says Melissa, continuing the conversation we started on the sidewalk about our 1960's-70's activist days, “and you won't believe it, but in walks Bobby Seale and these other Black Panthers. I could have died, I was so excited,” she's saying.

Ordinarily, I'd be enchanted by Melissa's close-up look at my 1960's idols, those dashing, leather-clad militants, but suddenly I'm thinking, “Who on this bus is Jewish, and who isn't?”

While Melissa continues her political tale, I'm silently checking off my co-travelers as they make their way down the aisle: That blond, older woman with the make-up: yes; the teenybopper with the low-cut tank and tattooed back: definitely not; the silver-haired man: I think so; that chubby young thing: maybe. Yes, no, definitely, maybe, yes.

It's a strange business being a Jew. Since our Prague Summer Seminars began a week ago, I haven't deliberately thought about who in our program is or isn't Jewish, although it would be untrue to say that I haven't absorbed the information in some unconscious way. Yes, I know that one of my four roommates, the young college girl, is Jewish. I've noticed the Goldberg's and Schines on our full program roster. And then there's the Jewish Studies class, which many are taking. And this has been enough for me, enough Jews to feel I'm not alone, that it's not alien territory.

The two women I've been hanging out with most, however, Melissa and our mutual friend, Nancy, are Christian, although they've never told me this. I just know. We three--aspiring writers with similar world views and senses of humor--spend our afternoons lounging and laughing for hours in the outdoor cafes of Prague's Old Town Square, eating melted cheese sandwiches in the sun, or wandering around the freshly-painted, pastel pink and yellow, Disneyland-like old city. We know we're having a tourist experience, touching only the very surface of Prague, but we don't care. This lovely, welcoming place makes us supremely content.

For me, these friendships too have been fine. I've felt connected to these women, not isolated.

But now, as our bus pulls out into the rain-slick streets of Prague, headed for the concentration camp, my Jewish self wants my attention.

“I’ve always regretted it terribly,” says Melissa, shifting in her seat, nervously pulling at the neck strings of her parka, “that I didn’t commit myself more to the struggle. I was always on the fringes, always a little frightened, and then I got married and had kids. You know. But lately I’ve been thinking about it so much and feeling so much regret, guilt even.”

I’m listening to her, aware that the conversation has taken a serious turn, but I’m thinking that this Terezin trip will be so different for me than for Melissa, so different for Jews than for non-Jews. I know it’s important for the non-Jews, and I’m glad they’re here. It would be terrible if no one were interested but the Jews. But really, it’s a Jewish trip. “This belongs to me,” I’m secretly thinking.

As an American Jew, born in 1940, at the height of Nazi power, I was raised with a heavy dose of Holocaust consciousness, Anne Frank as familiar to me as Betsy Ross. Although no one in my immediate family was killed in Europe, the power of the Nazi events is not diminished for me. If I am any kind of Jew at all, I am a “Holocaust” Jew—one defined and formed not by her religious beliefs but by the events of WWII and the milder but still insidious anti-Semitism my family experienced in the U.S. I am someone who knows that I too would have been thrown in the ovens had I been living during the War in Germany, Poland or right here in the Czech Republic—*here where the tiny country villages our buses now pass, once populated by numerous Jewish families, are undoubtedly Jew-less.*

Back home in the U.S., I am vigilant, just in case this happens again. While I care little about the religious practice of Judaism, I’m comforted that right on my block on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, only two doors down from my apartment, is a small Orthodox Jewish shul, housed in a brownstone, and on my corner, is a mammoth, yellow-brick Conservative synagogue. I’m always somewhat surprised to see the Orthodox men in their broad-brimmed,

black hats, rushing past my house every evening before sundown on their way to shul, but I want them here. I want their little kids to keep playing hide-and- seek on the street, slamming in and out of my front door, shrieking with laughter. But I want them here too, annoying me, endlessly. If they are here, then I am here.

Then there's the secret stash I keep hidden behind my bedroom bookcase, wrapped in silver foil against possible fire. It's not enough money yet, but it's the diamond in the hem of my dress, my survival fund, my crust of bread for whatever disaster might come—an earthquake, a pogrom, a dirty bomb. It will buy my way onto a train, or off a train, buy my way out of the city, or out of the camps, buy me my life.

How would one escape here in the Czech countryside, I'm wondering, across these flat, expansive fields that stretch forever, ending in small hills and houses, which are miles away? There is no place to hide, no trees or rocks. People would catch you running across these fields.

Finally, making me a more entitled concentration camp tourist, I feel, is my impressive private history of mourning the Holocaust. For most of my life, in intense waves, I've read book after book on the subject, fiction and non-fiction. There I am, a teenager, reading on my bed, wrapped in my quilt, sobbing over the Warsaw ghetto stories, the starvation deaths, the armed bands of resisters, the miracle escapes through the sewers. And there I am, a grown-up, watching Shindler's List three times by myself because my friends say they can't stand the pain. I've been fascinated by this horror, drawn to this pain, the inevitable tears, the choked throat, whatever that strange comfort has been in reliving this Jewish experience.

And so on the bus, as I shiver under my serape, talking to Melissa about our midlife reevaluations, and gazing out the window at the empty fields, what I am really looking for, far into the distance, is my imagined Jewish ghetto mountain. I am expectant, excited about what

will happen to me personally in that special air. I don't know what it will be, except some kind of fuller catharsis, perhaps, than the books and films have given me, a deeper connection to those dead Jews. Certainly there will be the same pain and the same tears.

After fifty minutes on the bus, our Czech student escort, a tall, lanky fellow, announces that we'll be stopping first at a place called "Mala Pevnost," the "Small Fortress." I didn't expect this visit, but a few minutes later, we debark in a huge parking lot and walk in the drizzle past a large graveyard toward a one-story, brick garrison.

The tourist brochure at the entrance explains that this fortress was a 19th century military prison, commandeered by the S.S. during the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia, the current day Czech Republic. I see this was not a "final solution" kind of place, but more a political prison. The brochure says that 32,000 inmates, mostly Czechs, were imprisoned here, men and women, Jewish and non-Jewish resistance fighters, political dissidents, and troublemaking Jews from the nearby Terezin ghetto.

Soon our group of about forty is met by a tour guide who will escort us around the prison. This 20-something Czech woman has startled-looking blue eyes behind circular spectacles, a slight overbite, and that almost phosphorescent, cherry-red, dyed hair the teenagers are wearing back in the States. On this dismal day, though, she wears appropriate gray slacks, a gray sweater and carries a folded red umbrella.

Our large group follows her from Block A to Block B, prison cell to prison cell. I am separated from Melissa in the crowd, but I'm pleased to be on my own. Here suddenly are the rooms I've seen so many times in photos and movies--those coarse wooden beds, stacked three or four tiers high. The guide tells us: One hundred prisoners to a small cell, one toilet for all with no running water, rain-soaked beds, no blankets, iron shackles. We see a room with 30 or 40

pink porcelain sinks, installed for show only, to impress Red Cross inspectors, but never used by the prisoners. I hear the words and understand the horror, but strangely I feel nothing, although I'm aware my teeth are clamped tight.

The guide leads us next to a delousing room. When she tells us that the spigots actually dispensed anti-lice chemicals, I begin to feel resentful. I don't want to experience pain when a delousing chamber is a real delousing chamber and not a disguised gas chamber, as it usually was for the Jews. I can feel my resistance. This is not a Jewish prison. This is not a death camp. This is not an Auschwitz. I will not let myself be moved by this. I am surprised at myself for being so angry, so unfeeling about this place. Certainly the guide is partly at fault. This pale young woman (probably Christian) dispenses information bits in a piercing voice. Her words seem stilted, rehearsed. She doesn't give us much information. She too has no feeling. Even worse, by the time our large group manages to crowd through narrow doors into the bleak cement rooms, the guide is often just finishing her talk. "That is all for this place," she repeats each time. "We can go on now."

I am not the only one annoyed by this young woman with the playful red hair. Others in the group are grouching. "God, she's not feeling this at all," says the blond with the make-up. "This is awful, so cold," says another woman, encased in her bright yellow rain slicker, certainly within earshot of the guide. "Can't she loosen up a little?"

As we file out from the confines of the cement cells into a large courtyard, the guide announces that our group will go through a narrow, dark and very long tunnel. She suggests that anyone with claustrophobia might want to walk around instead, and she will accompany them.

I'm surprised to see that I alone opt for this choice. Lately I've been developing just such a phobia—in MRI machines, in middle airplane seats, in beds, tucked in too tightly.

The guide and I set off from the group and walk in the open air along a path by stone walls overgrown with grass.

This is an unexpected turn. Here, alone with this young woman, I find myself oddly pleased with the chance to have a private talk with her. Suddenly I feel not so much a Jew, identified with past victimization, a searcher for catharsis, but a run-of-the-mill tourist, an American visitor in the Czech Republic. After all, what do I know about this country? What do I know about young Czech people, or who this young woman might be, and what this place might mean to her?

“Do you work here every day?” I ask, breaking the awkward silence between us as we walk through the drizzle.

“Yes, I do,” she answers in her excellent, but heavily accented English.

“How do you like it?”

“So far it’s OK, but I started only a month ago,” she says, brushing her long reddish bangs away from her eyes. “I just want to come here to work and speak the lines I need to. I have to keep a distance from it and try not to get too involved,” she says in a rushed, breathless tone. “You see,” she adds, looking at me intently as if it were important for me to understand, “my older sister worked here before. She used to read everything about this place, the ghetto, and the Holocaust. All the time. Everywhere.”

She stops, turning around to look behind us, as if she’s forgotten something, and then continues our walk. “But I’m not going to do this,” she says, her voice quavering now. “I’m not going to take the work home with me. I’ll read about it, of course, but only during work hours if there’s no tour group coming through.”

We wind around stone walls and through muddy paths. The drizzle has turned to rain, and the guide opens her red umbrella over both of us.

“My sister finally had to quit this job,” she continues, speaking faster and faster, but almost in a whisper now. “She started to have terrible dreams, nightmares. It really began to affect her during the day, too. She got help, but she’s still very disturbed, unable to work. She’s not doing well.”

We round a large stone battlement and see our tour members filing out of the tunnel with bent backs, one by one, blinking in the new light.

The young guide leads us all to a large yard, overgrown with soft grasses and explains how hundreds of inmates were executed here, hung on the small black gallows or shot against the stone wall, which is still chipped with bullet holes.

“That is all for this place. We can go on now,” she says, in her loud, tour leader voice.

I am still standing near her. I catch her eye, nod slightly, and she walks with me through a doorway in the wall, out of the killing ground to the adjacent yard where a large swimming pool, once used by the children and wives of the Gestapo, lies empty in decay. I imagine the little slippery wet children and SS wives swimming to the sounds of screams and gun shots.

“I’m so tired today,” continues my guide, looking at me now as if she might cry. “I didn’t sleep well last night and then my grandmother woke me up an hour and a half early by mistake, and I couldn’t go back to sleep. I’m really worried I won’t do very well at all today.”

I reach out and rub my hand gently on her back. “I’m sure you’ll do fine,” I say. “You are doing fine.” And for the first time this day my throat constricts and my eyes begin to tear.

Our group moves out soon after, boards the buses, and in a few more minutes arrives at Terezin, the small town that was turned into a Jewish ghetto, the camp. It too is flat, a dismal, gray town with a moat, now a garden, around it. There are even Czech people living here today, as if nothing had ever happened. But there is no spirally road, no castle, no mountain. This is no fairy tale place.

There is, however, a small museum in one of the buildings. I am, by now, so tired I cannot concentrate on the exhibits, but wander through the floors just glancing here and there. I do stop, though, before the glass case which shows opera librettos, photos of fiddlers and composers, and the children who performed the opera “Bumblebee,” here in this place. Finally I come to the wall of children’s art--some of the same pictures I remember from the book I owned. It is here that I stand for a long time, unable to turn away from this saddest of all art.

In the gift shop there is a reproduction of a drawing by 10-year-old Hanus Fischl, who came to Terezin in October, 1941 and died in Auschwitz in June, 1944. It’s a beach ball, drawn in bright red, yellow and orange pastel—an image seemingly so full of joy and light that it strikes my heart with immeasurable sadness, and a sob escapes my throat. And now I cannot stop crying, and I’m embarrassed as I stand before the cashier and search for correct Czech money as the tears stream down my cheeks.

* * *

DAY 2

Day 2

September 12:

There's energy in the aftermath—a powerful, nervous energy. It's more than *shpilkes*, the Yiddish word my father used for my brother's "ants in the pants" when he couldn't sit still at the dining room table. It's like the crazed exhilaration I felt on the day of my sister's death, an event also far beyond my comprehension. Today, September 12, despite my shaking legs, my pervasive nausea, I must get out of my house, away from TV's ceaseless replay of yesterday's attack, no matter how compelling. I need to escape from these phone calls and emails from family and friends, no matter how comforting. I have to move, DO something to help.

But what can I do? The crisis is downtown. Certainly people are trapped and hurt there right now. Huge fires are burning at the site and spreading smoke all over the city. But I live on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, more than a hundred blocks from the disaster. The subways are shut down. I have no car, and they've cordoned off the downtown area anyway. I have no medical training. Friends tell me the blood banks at my local hospitals are turning people away.

I put on my sneakers, ready to walk somewhere, anywhere. I check my email one last time. Finally, a notice: "Socks needed for rescue workers' wet feet. Drop off in lobby of 103rd Street and West End. Volunteers desperately needed at Roosevelt Hospital on 59th Street."

I rush to my bureau to find socks that will fit men's feet. Certainly I can spare three pairs. But which ones? I agonize. I should give my heavy black ones, but I don't want to. So new, so thick! With guilt, I pick some reasonably good socks, but not the best. At the last minute, I sacrifice my thick, bright-blue wool socks, old but loved.

I run down the stairs of my building and stride the few blocks to make my offering. In the 103rd Street lobby, the doorman points to a spot in the corner. I place my tiny green plastic bag on the floor next to a large package of new socks someone else has left. (I never thought of *buying* new socks.) I try to forgive myself. I am poor. I'm trying my best. I've done something. I've given at least three pairs of socks with what feels like love, and I can almost see the three firemen pulling off their soaked, muddy socks and putting on my dry ones with sighs of pleasure, especially those blue ones.

I buy cat litter and food for dinner, noticing with concern that the bread and bottled water in my huge supermarket are almost sold out, and the cash machine is empty. (What do others know that I don't?)

I return home at 3 pm to the ringing phone. It's Elisa, my best friend--someone whom I never see enough because she works in East Harlem every day as a nurse practitioner for the mentally ill homeless, and dances salsa with a mania every night. There's been some tension lately because of her unavailability.

But here she is, in the middle of the day, calling from her home to see how I'm doing, what I'm doing. Her voice is flat, heavy. "I've been wandering the city for hours," she laments. "I've gone from hospital to hospital all day asking to help, but no one needs me. I just feel I have to DO something." She too has the big *shpilkes*.

"I just gave 3 pairs of socks," I say. "Believe it or not, it made me feel good." Ordinarily we would laugh at my 3-sock effort. Today we don't.

When I mention Roosevelt Hospital's call for help, she's excited. "Let's go! Let's walk down."

We meet on the corner of 100th Street and Riverside Drive, by the large monument. Elisa, youthful and beautiful as always, her long, brown hair flowing behind her, is dressed in her walking outfit—her cut off denim shorts, her green T-shirt with the smiling dolphins, and her only other accoutrement, the bright pink fanny pack. Elisa, the colorful, the carefree. I, on the other hand, the worrier, the “prepared,” carry all I might need for 24 (or 48?) hours straight in a hospital I fear will be air-conditioned—two sweaters, my serape, both glasses, quarters, a pad, a pen, toothpaste, toothbrush, a change of underwear, and today’s *New York Times*, just in case there are no more sheets to change or medical workers to feed.

Next to the monument are the stairs, which will bring us down into Riverside Park and the path downtown. I take this route often, especially in warm weather, passing the structure on my way to the park to read my students’ papers, to walk for exercise. Although the monument is quite lovely, I don’t usually pay it much attention since it’s so familiar. I’ve lived nearby for twenty-two years, after all. But today, as Elisa and I walk past the large stone structure, a flash of color reaches my eyes, a shock of something unusual in the monument fountain.

Bouquets of flowers, perhaps seven or eight—white roses, earthy sunflowers, red and pink carnations, large pink lilies—rest in the chest-high, circular fountain. With their stems placed down carefully in the water, their flowers facing out, only the burst of fresh blossoms shows over the rim. I haven’t been crying so far, but now a sob erupts, and I try to stifle it. I’m embarrassed, even in front of Elisa. “Oh God!” I say in my quaky voice, “Isn’t this incredible? So sad. So sweet.”

Of course. This is the Firefighter’s Memorial. I knew this. But my neighbors, the flower buyers, have made the connection I hadn’t. The firefighters, hundreds perhaps, are now trapped or dead downtown. I’ve been so stunned by events, I haven’t really thought about it yet—that

there will be mourning. It seems too soon to think about the dead. I just want to experience the attack site as some amorphous, monstrous wound “down there.” Yet something does feel right about these flowers in the fountain.

Elisa and I move off down to the park and walk the path that runs along the Hudson River. It shouldn't be such a glorious, sunny day. But it is. At 4 p.m. on a Wednesday, the park shouldn't be so full. But it is—like any other fine-weather Sunday. Helmeted fathers and children are biking, women are walking their dogs and babies, couples lie in the sun, reading, hugging, and kids skateboard. You could not tell just by looking that this narrow green park is buzzing because all schools are shut, buildings are crushed or filled with smoke and debris, and subways, bridges and tunnels into Manhattan are closed. But a careful look shows that something is wrong with people's faces. You would need to airbrush out the sad, stern mouths, the red, puffy eyes, the pale skin, and pipe in canned laughter to make these park goers into a true Sunday crowd. They are, instead, universally somber. Elisa and I know, for we watch the faces with great care, listen to their words, their tone of voice. We're looking, listening for clues to see if others feel as we do. We see no smiles. We hear no laughter. None. The absence reveals this as a gruesome holiday.

The other signal is the cloud that sweeps over us now. “Look,” says Elisa, pointing to the sky overhead—a gray-white mass is above us and to our right, over the river. To our left, over upper Manhattan, the sky is still clear blue. The smoke from the disaster fires is drifting uptown with acrid smells of burning computers, office chairs, planes, paper, people.

For the first time, I feel a direct connection to the site. I'm glad to finally be a part of it, breathe in its air. Yet I also want to run away. I'm afraid for my asthma. I'm simply afraid.

We turn out of the park in the low 60's and walk toward Roosevelt Hospital. Elisa mentions Masato. "I'm not going to be able to fly to Florida with Masato tomorrow, am I?" she asks, knowing the answer. I'd forgotten the crazy four-day Salsa/Meringue Dance Festival at the Florida hotel she'd planned with her new favorite dance partner. Last week's big question had been whether they should share a hotel room or not. This week, all planes are grounded.

At the hospital, the emergency platform is quiet. Health workers stand outside, leaning on empty gurneys, waiting. No ambulances arrive. Inside at the front desk, two young men in T-shirts and khaki shorts, volunteers themselves, tell us they need no more help. We can sign the list of 300 other waiting volunteers if we want. Clearly, the entire city has an advanced case of *shpilkes*—everyone needs to DO something. Yet, we are beginning to understand--there are few wounded to care for. Almost everyone left in the rubble of the Towers is gone.

Vita

Susan Ribner is a writer, a teacher of writing and English as a Second Language, and a former martial artist and karate instructor. She currently lives and works in New York City. Ms. Ribner has been writing on women's history, the martial arts, children's literature, and human rights since the late 1960's, initially under the pseudonyms Rebecca or Rachel Moon. (Ms. Moon's first appearance was as the struggling new karate student in Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful*, 1970.)

During the 1970's, Ms. Ribner was a staff member of the Council on Interracial Books for Children, working to promote children's books free of gender and racial stereotypes. With Bradford Chambers of the Council, she co-edited *Right On!* (New American Library, 1970), an anthology of African-American literature for young readers.

For twenty years Ms. Ribner was an active martial artist, studying karate, t'ai chi ch'uan, aikido, and arnis, and she attained the rank of Second-Degree Black Belt in Shotokan Karate. From 1974-88, she was the Founder, Director, and Chief Instructor of the Women's Center Karate Club, a school for women in New York City. In 1978, Ms. Ribner co-authored with Richard Chin the young adult book *The Martial Arts* (1978). She was also instrumental in forming the New York based Women's Martial Arts Union and its outgrowth, the National Women's Martial Arts Federation—organizations devoted to promoting women's training in the various arts.

For the last fifteen years, Ms. Ribner has been teaching Developmental and Expository Writing, primarily to freshmen and second language learners at Hunter College and Baruch College, both part of the City University of New York (CUNY). Ms. Ribner is also an ardent traveler and in 1995 participated in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China.

Susan Ribner has a B.A. (1962) and an M.A. (1965) in Comparative Government from Cornell University, and an M.A. in TESOL (Teaching English to Students of Other Languages) from Hunter College (1991). She began her study of Creative Non-Fiction at the UNO Prague Summer Seminars in the summer of 2000.