

## Life is Here/Chapter 1

“Daddy?”

Suzy uncurled herself from her hiding place, in the footwell behind the passenger seat. It was sunrise. She smelled gasoline, heard her father chatting with the attendant about the space race. She sat up and stretched. Suzy hoped they’d gone far enough that he wouldn’t turn back. She hoped he wouldn’t be angry.

Walt broke off his conversation. “Suzy?!?”

“Don’t be mad.” She hugged her pillow to her chest as he took in her suitcase and Barbie carrier.

“God damn it!”

Suzy quaked. “I want, I want to live in Florida.”

“That’s not up to you.” Walt stared at her. “I’ll have to call your mother.”

Suzy spilled out of the car. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

Her father shook his head, huffed a sigh, then took her by the hand.

“Where are we?”

“Just south of Indianapolis.” He stopped at the door to ladies’ room, opened it for her, then turned back to the pay phone. Suzy had never been in a public bathroom without her mom. The light flickered. It smelled bad, like the fish tank at school when the water needed to be changed. Suzy hovered over the toilet, so her skin wouldn’t touch it, then washed her hands extra long like her mom had taught her.

When Suzy stepped outside, Walt shooed her to the car. There, she watched, waited, making sad/happy faces in the rear view mirror. It wasn't a short call.

He came back to the car. "You can stay til school starts again in the fall."

Suzy caught her breath. "Oh, Daddy!"

"I work a lot." He turned the key, starting the car's engine, returning them to the road. "I'll ask the neighbor if you can spend days with them. She has a daughter your age."

"Okay," she gulped. Would she miss her mom too much? The way she'd gently shake Suzy and say, 'up an at 'em Cutie Snooze.' For sure she'd miss her little brother Dave, who squealed when she tickled him. And she'd have liked to pack her blue Schwinn girls bike.

Suzy unzipped her suitcase, and found her two books. "Can I sit in front?"

He patted the seat in affirmation. Suzy slid her body, and the books, over the seat and settled herself. Between them was an open shoe box, which Suzy eyed: a tennis trophy, a framed photo of her parents' wedding, an M mug.

"No pictures of me and Dave?"

"I have those at home." He noticed her haul. "You brought library books?"

"I thought you might bring me back."

"We've crossed state lines," he teased. "I hope we don't get stopped."

Suzy wondered: would they return her along with the books? Would she lose her library card? "Are you mad at me?"

Walt kept his eyes on the road. "I'm proud of you, Suze."

Another gulp. "Really?"

"You took a chance."

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Suzy sat up in bed, still wearing the t-shirt and flowered shorts she'd worn the day before. Her father must have carried her in last night. She felt a breeze, listened to the crash — wait — crash of waves nearby. The air smelled like salt.

A new room in a new house! She liked its pale pink walls, its wood plank floors, its white twin bed. Her suitcase and Barbie carrier were set on a chest, also white. She spied a desk, white and clean and new like the rest of the furniture. And on a see-through chair — really! — she saw that her father had laid out for her a pink-striped beach towel and a bucket of sand tools. She was all set up.

Suzy got out of bed and opened the bag of purchases they'd made along the way: post-cards, markers, comic books. She set out the cards — Nashville, Atlanta, Jacksonville— lined up in order of stops. What an adventure! Suzy had inked the route on her dad's road map of the U.S. Suzy felt a burst of pride in herself, traveling from there to here. She would use one of the post-cards to write to her best friend Marilyn. Suzy had already been missing Marilyn before she stowed away, because Marilyn spent all summer with her grandparents on Elk Lake.

Suzy toured the house. Beside her room was another, made up for a boy, painted wavy blue with boats. Looking at it made her feel seasick. Another room was for a baby, with a crib and a rocking chair. Down a hallway she found her father's room, darkened by closed white shutters. On his nightstand were framed photos of Suzy, her brother Dave and that wedding photo she'd seen in the car. Suzy turned back and walked into a space that was living room, dining

room, kitchen all in one, with a wall of windows. Outside, a yellow pebble yard — no grass!? — was surrounded by a tall green hedge. Turning back to the room, Suzy saw her father's desk and bookcases. On his desk was an open graph pad, with drawn arcs and scribbled equations. Above his desk, one image: the moon's orbits of the earth, which looked like hula hoops to Suzy.

On the counter stood a glass of milk and a slice of birthday cake. Suzy pulled herself up to the stool and ate, swinging her legs, smiling. Suzy and her Dad, in Florida. During the week he worked but on weekends, he'd told her, they'd go to the beach, they'd go to Brevard Zoo, they'd go to Sea World. They would try every custard stand, just like they had on the drive here. They'd find a pool and its swim team. They'd buy her a bike. They'd find a church, even though Suzy liked the three wishes she got to make at every new church they'd gone to along the way. The wishes were always the same: that she'd made the right choice, that she'd see her mom and Dave again, that the librarians would forgive her.

After she ate, Suzy brought the dishes to the sink, then dragged a chair over so she could reach the faucet and dish soap. She washed her plate and glass and silverware and set them in the rack. She returned the chair to its place and made an inventory. Refrigerator: Daddy's cake, milk, beer. Pantry: Cheerios and corn chips. What would she have for lunch? What a change from the road, where waitresses brought them foods they hadn't ordered — a slice of striped ice cream, a piece of peach pie — because her Daddy was so handsome/a looker/a dreamboat and Suzy was cute as a button/a kitten/a bug.

A knock at the door? Suzy went to it and found a same-age girl, wearing only a two-piece bathing suit. "My mom says you're playing with us today."

Suzy opened the door wider.

“I’m Jaycee.” The girl looked at Suzy’s outfit. “We’re going to the beach. You’ll need a bathing suit and towel or you can borrow one of mine.”

“I have both. Want to see my new room?” Her dad was right; this girl was the same age, and had long dark hair like Suzy’s.

“Sure.” The girl followed. “We have the same house. Different furniture.”

“I like it here,” Suzy offered.

“My mom said you ran away.”

Suzy covered her mouth, giggling. “Stowaway!”

“Neat!”

“I get to stay for the summer.” She pulled a two-piece from her suitcase, and picked up the towel and beach toys. She pointed at the Barbie carrier. “Should we bring her?”

“Does she have a bathing suit?”

“Only dresses.”

“I can lend her one.”

In the hallway, Jaycee noticed the other bedrooms. “Where’s the rest of your family?”

“At home in Michigan.”

“They’re not coming?”

Suzy shook her head.

“My dad doesn’t live with us anymore.” Jaycee covered her ears. “It’s more quiet now.”

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Suzy and Jaycee set their towels on the hard sand. At their feet, they displayed their equipment: yellow and orange buckets, rakes, castle forms, sifters, shovels. Behind their heads they set their Coppertone and identical Barbies. Suzy didn't say but she was very pleased to have found a same-age friend.

Behind and to the left of them a blue striped umbrella shaded Jaycee's mom, younger brother Rodney and baby sister Amy. There was comfort — and ice cold drinks — having Jaycee's mom nearby, even though Rodney stomped and smashed their sand towers.

Closer to the water, teenagers lay on towels or perched on low beach chairs. Nearby, there was a cooler of drinks and a smattering of surf boards and beach balls. Connie Francis' "Where the Boys Are" played from a navy and white radio that looked like a purse, with its soft handle and ivory nobs.

"The blonde girl in the red bikini is Trish, she babysits for us." Jaycee's head rested in the V of her hands. "She was dating Troy, the blond guy in the striped suit, see him? But he was... mean... so now she dates Tad, he's also blond. I guess they're all blond, he's in the blue suit with the white string. He's a surfer." Jaycee scrambled to her feet. "C'mon, I'll introduce you."

Suzy followed her friend to the teenagers.

"Another Jaycee?" Trish exclaimed. "Where'd you find a look-a-like?" She patted the sand, a sign that Suzy and Jaycee could join them. "Beach twins!" The two girls stayed at Trish's feet, sharing her Tanfastic, sipping her no-cal Ginger Ale — yuk! — batting away beach balls tossed by surfer boys.

Fun in the sun! Suzy felt like she was in that *Gidget* movie she wasn't allowed to see.

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Some days were just too hot to be at the beach. When that happened, Jaycee's family, along with Suzy, retreated to the dark cool of Jaycee's house. There they'd have a sit-at-the-table-lunch of hot dogs and Mac 'n cheese or tuna fish on toast. Afterwards, baby Amy quietly went down for her nap, but Rodney kicked and screamed and sometimes bit his mother, struggling to stay awake. If Rodney's tantrum went on too long, Jaycee and Suzy tip toed over to Suzy's house, which was equally dark and cool — and quiet. They'd work on a jigsaw puzzle of the solar system, or play The Game of Life, or change their Barbies out of bathing suits and into ball gowns.

One afternoon it was 90, with no breeze. The girls spread out puzzle pieces on the glass coffee table. Jaycee's gaze drifted to the shelved books. "What does drafting mean?"

"Drawing." Suzy joined two pieces of purple Pluto.

"What's an internal com-bus-tion engine?"

"Cars, boats, lawnmowers."

"How do you know?"

"I asked my dad the same questions sitting in the same place." Suzy searched for a piece of Saturn's rings. "Why the race to the moon? Do you ever wonder? Why not Mars?"

Jaycee made a guess. "Martians?"

Suzy giggled. "Marmails? Marmonauts?"

"My dad is training to be an astronaut," Jaycee said. "In Hawaii. He sent me a postcard."

Suzy traced her finger along the half finished puzzle. "Maybe my dad will shoot your dad into space."

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Walt put his purchases in Suzy's beach bag and handed it to her. He carried the board and strapped it to the top of his long sedan.

"We need a convertible," Suzy chirped.

"Next weekend."

"Really?"

Walt opened his hands, indicating the sun and fair weather. "Why drive inside with weather like this?"

Suzy grinned and got in the car. She didn't ask anymore about the front seat. She took it.

"Where next?" He asked.

"The library. I'm running out of books."

"I need film for the Super 8."

Suzy grinned. She was the star of every movie.

"Then the market," he added. "I want to grill some steaks."

"Can we invite Jaycee and her family?"

"I owe them, looking after you. Have you written to your mom?"

Suzy shook her head. "The postcard is small. I have too much to tell."



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Walt launched them to shore. The children fell or jumped off or pulled one another into the water. Other kids joined in. Suzy bobbed and beamed. She overheard people — teenagers, surfers, moms and dads — commenting on “that good looking guy, with the kids and the surf-board, is he an astronaut?”

By lunchtime Suzy and the others had tired. (Not her dad. Tad, the teenage surfer, had come by and offered to teach Walt.) The girls watched the lesson from under the umbrella, got bored, ate cold sandwiches, played with baby Amy, helped Rodney build his own fort to crush.

The girls wandered over to the teenagers and sat themselves at Trish’s feet.

“Hey teenie beanies.”

“Summer is so long,” Jaycee complained.

“You’d rather be in school?”

Jaycee shook her head. “I don’t want to be the new girl.”

“Everyone’s new.”

“I guess.”

“Cape brats.” Trish turned to Suzy. “Your dad’s so handsome.”

Suzy shrugged. From Trish’s magazine collection, Suzy dragged a *Silver Screen* and pointed to the young star on its cover. “That’s what my mom looks like.”

“Tuesday Weld?”

“Only my mom’s hair has curls.”

“Do you miss her?”

“Yup.” Suzy squinted, trying not to cry. She wanted a slice of her mom’s peach cobbler and to cuddle on the couch with Dave, watching *Leave it to Beaver*; while it baked. Some nights Suzy cried herself to sleep, quietly, thinking of them. Suzy knew not to say anything because if she did, she’d be sent home: she’d lose this life. With her small arm she made a circle, indicating the beach and sky, the breaking waves, the long pier. “They are missing this.”

“Did your mom have the baby?”

“Not yet.”

“Maybe after?” Trish suggested.

Suzy shook her head and mouthed the word. “Divorce.” Her dad had sold the crib and the furniture in the boy’s room.

“So he’s single.”

Jaycee wriggled closer. “He’s dating my mom. I saw them kissing the other night. He’ll be my dad, too.”

Suzy sucked in her breath and clenched her hands. “No - he - won’t!”

“We can be sisters!”

“He’s *my* dad!” Suzy lunged, tackling Jaycee. She pulled her hair, scratched her cheek, her arm, her chest. Jaycee fought back, turning Suzy over. Suzy closed her eyes as Jaycee landed a punch. Turning her head, she bit Jaycee’s arm, kicking her. Sand and cups flew, a transistor radio got knocked over but continued broadcasting the game. Trish tried to divide the girls, but couldn’t: they scratched her, too. At last, the surfers pulled them apart.

Jaycee wiped the sand from her face and pointed at Suzy. “She started it!”

Suzy knew it to be true. Standing over her was her father, still wet from the water, his surf board beside him. Suzy gathered her things from under the umbrella. Her dad extended his hand, and Suzy took it. Her hair was caked with sand, and her cheek throbbed.

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Suzy would not spend her days with Jaycee so her father hired Trish to watch her. Together they took care of some things weighing on Suzy, namely, the overdue library books. Also, the purchase of underwear, shirts and shorts, an everyday dress and a fancy dress, because Suzy had grown.

Sometimes Trish's cousin Johnnie came along. He was two years older than Suzy, and looked just like Trish, with freckles and sandy red-blonde hair. Johnnie didn't like to go to the beach because Jaycee teased him about his pale skin and fear of sharks.

When Suzy and Trish went to the beach it wasn't the same. Suzy laid her towel beside Trish's chair and read books. When she wanted to go into the water, she asked one of the boys if she could hitch a ride out on a surfboard; she'd bodysurf back. The boys kept the radio tuned to major league baseball, and kept a tally of Mickey Mantle's home runs.

Jaycee came by. "No one reads books at the beach."

"My mom does."

"My mom does," she repeated.

Without losing her place in the book, Suzy scooped a handful of sand and threw it at Jaycee.

“Ouch.”

“Scram,” Trish advised.

Jaycee stomped off.

“Could you apologize?”

Suzy shook her head, still reading. “He’ll *never* be her dad.”

In the evening, Suzy’s father came home from work, fixed himself a gimlet, and started dinner. Sometimes he didn’t bother: he’d bring home burgers and fries or splurge and take her out for surf and turf. Mostly, though, they ate at home, with the sliding glass doors open to the night breeze, hearing the thrash of the neighbor’s palms, crickets chirp, faintly the waves — crash — waves — crash. It was Suzy’s job to set the table. She often made Jell-o or walked to the store to buy ice cream for dessert. After dinner they sat on lounge chairs in the pebble yard and looked at the stars. He showed her boxy Pegasus, and Copernicus — which looked to her like a butterfly — and Libra, which looked like a house. He used binoculars and made notes on a graph pad.

“What are you measuring?”

“The distance between stars.”

“They move?” Suzy shook her head in disbelief.

“They have their own orbits.”

“How do you know so much?”

Walt set the binoculars aside. “I was a good student. Like you.”

“How will I get back to Michigan?”

“Do you want to leave?”

She nodded. "At the end of summer."

"I'll talk to your mom."

"You won't drive me?"

"I can't take the time off, Suze."

"Can I fly?"

"I can't afford it."

Suzy pointed to a constellation that looked like a crown.

"That's Corona Borealis."

"Maybe Trish could take me," Suzy suggested. "She just bought a Bug."

"I must be paying her too much." Walt laughed.

"You won't marry Jaycee's mom," she whispered.

Walt showed her lacerta, a faint "W" in the dark sky. "I'm not going to marry anyone ever again."

"You *kissed* her."

"Oh, Suze. We're adults."

"You'll go back to Mom?" Suzy perked up.

"No," he turned to his graph pad and wrote something. "I'm not a good husband."

"You're a good dad."

"Probably not." He closed the pad. "But I like having you here."

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When her dad worked late, Suzy went to Trish's house for dinner. Johnnie lived next door. One night before dinner Johnnie invited Suzy to his backyard.

Suzy slipped on her flip flops because the houses on this street had yards with hard stiff grass that cut her feet. She followed him, turning her body like he did to get through the bushes without getting caught on their brambles.

"Voila!" On the concrete patio, Johnnie stood beside a row of homemade rockets. "This one is fueled with a mix of water, sugar, potassium nitrate, Karo syrup. This next one is more a smoke bomb than a rocket, it's made with newspaper, wood glue, and potassium chlorate." Johnnie continued, pointing out a rocket fueled by alcohol and air, one made with powdered sugar and kitty litter, another via electric match. One was black powder — also known as a firework. His favorite was powered by stomping on a pedal that pushed air through a thin tube, sending the rocket airborne into the evening sky. "My dad says I can commercialize that one."

"What does that mean?"

"Sell in stores."

"Wow."

"The rockets: I did them for you," Johnnie explained. "Will you be my girlfriend?"

"I'm seven."

"My parents met when they were nine, playing anagrams."

"That's two whole years."

Johnnie picked up a tall multicolored cylinder. "This one took me the longest."

"I'm going back to Michigan before school starts."

“Until then!” Johnnie sat himself, cross-legged, near Suzy’s feet. “You’re so brave. You hitched a ride to paradise. You beat up the beach bully.”

Suzy didn’t feel especially special: she felt like she’d made a choice — getting into her dad’s car — that she couldn’t undo. And Jaycee wasn’t a meany; she’d said something Suzy couldn’t accept.

“You’ll be my girlfriend?”

“Ok.” Suzy shrugged.

“Din-ner!” Trish’s mom called.

Johnnie stood and grabbed Suzy by the hand. They ran-skipped together across the lawn, safely sideways through the bushes.

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Suzy was eating breakfast when Jaycee’s mom knocked on the side door. “Honey, you’re coming with us to buy school supplies.”

“I’m not going to school here.”

C.J. held up a wad of cash. “I’m just following your Daddy’s orders.”

Of course Suzy wouldn’t go to school here! Her dad was probably making sure she was ready, like the rest of the kids. “Ok. I’ll leave a note for Trish.”

At the five and dime store, Suzy couldn’t avoid Jaycee. They would be in the same grade so they needed the same supplies: two number two pencils, a composition book, a zippered case

that would hold a pink eraser, a six-inch ruler, those pencils, chalk, and an eight pack of Crayola crayons. Suzy made a point to buy a flowered zipper case; Jaycee's was striped.

There were so many other children and parents buying supplies the aisles were jammed. Suzy lost track of Jaycee. Had they left the store without her? Suzy looked up and around for Jaycee's mom. But all the moms looked alike, they were tan and blonde and wore brightly patterned shifts.

Then Suzy heard Jaycee's mom talking about Suzy's dad. "Yes, so handsome! No, there's nothing between us. My husband is stationed in Hawaii."

Jaycee reappeared. Suzy turned to her. "See, my dad won't be your dad."

Jaycee wouldn't look at Suzy. She filled her case. "I never cared about that."

Suzy huffed. "You made a big deal about it on the beach."

"I just wanted to be sisters."

Suzy felt her cheeks heat.

"You shouldn't of hit me."

Suzy tapped her cheek bone. "I had a black eye. Then purple. Green. Yellow."

Jaycee looked up, cracking a small smile. "One of my scratches got infected."

"I'm sorry. I was so mad!"

"I shouldn't have said it," Jaycee admitted. "I knew it wasn't true."

Suzy extended a crooked pinky. "Friends forever?"

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Walt set down the phone. "I can't find another sitter."

Suzy blinked. Trish had left for college, and her dad had to work in Houston for a few weeks. "Can I come with you?"

Walt thought about it. "What about school?"

Suzy brightened. "Hooky?"

"I'm already in trouble with your mother, keeping you 'til Christmas."

Suzy was torn. She missed her mother and Dave, but her father couldn't drive her home til then. When she'd hidden in his car she hadn't made a plan to go back. But she was always going to go back! Florida was an adventure.

Walt picked up the phone again. "Let's see if you can stay with Jaycee."

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Suzy moved in next door. The extra twin bed in Jaycee's room became hers.

"You can put your school supplies on this side." Jaycee pointed to her desk.

"Thanks." Suzy had grudgingly accepted this plan. It was like a sleepover, with no end.

"I don't want school to start." Jaycee flopped on her bed. "Endless summer!"

"Let's go to the beach while we can." Suzy was already in her suit. "If it's too hot we'll go to Johnnie's house and play Crazy Eights."

"He taught you to play chess?"

"Why are you mean to him?"

Jaycee frowned. "He's your boyfriend but I like him, too."

Suzy shrugged. “We’ll share.”

With that, it was a peaceful end to summer. Suzy accepted her fate: she would be in Florida until Christmas, she would live with Jaycee and her family until her dad came back from Houston. Which was okay, until later that week, when Suzy opened her Barbie case and found her (naked) doll’s pony tail cut off, her ears poked with red thumbtacks. Rodney had done the same to Jaycee’s doll. Suzy curled up on her bed and cried: she wanted to go home.

After the beach and before dinner, Suzy snuck into her dad’s house. It was dark and quiet, no ballgame on the radio, no dad sipping his cocktail while he stirred a pot of shrimp burgoo. Suzy turned on a light and pulled a chair to the phone; with one finger she labored to dial all the numbers. Ring...ring...ring... no one picked up! Where was her mom? At the park with Dave? Suzy settled the receiver back on its hook. She studied the phone list: Work, Joanie, Mom & Dad, Suzanne... Aunt Suzy! Aunt Suzy, who lived next door. Suzy dialed those numbers: gosh, it was hard to move the dial with one finger, so she used two.

“Walt?”

Suzy couldn’t speak; she clammed up hearing her aunt’s voice.

“Congratulations!”

“It’s Suzy.”

“Did you hear? Your mom had the baby! It’s a boy! His name is Nicholas. Nick. Nicky. He’s blonde, like your mom. Not like you and Dave.”

Suzy sniffled. “I want to come home.”

“Your friend Marilyn came by on her bike looking for you.”

More tears, and now Suzy’s nose was running, too.

“Your mom is coming home from the hospital tomorrow. Call her then.”

Suzy set the receiver in its cradle and climbed down from the stool. She looked around the dark, empty house. Why had her dad left her behind? She should have hid in his car again, surprised him in Houston.

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“Momma, I want to come home.” Suzy could hear coo-ing. “I want to see the baby. I want to see you and Dave and I want to go to my school not this school. Come get me, please!”

“Honey, I just had the baby, I can’t drive anywhere. Your dad and I agreed you’d stay til Christmas.”

“I can’t do it!” Suzy pictured her barbered Barbie. She couldn’t help crying.

“Let me talk to Dad.”

Suzy squirmed. “He’s in Houston.”

“He left you?!?”

Suzy snuffled. “I’m living with the neighbors.” Outside, Suzy heard the familiar crash of waves.

“Jesus Christ!”

“Momma!”

“Cheese and rice.”

“I shouldn’t have hid in the car.”

Joanie huffed a laugh. “Oh, Suzy Q.”

“I miss you every day, Momma.” From the street side, the settings sun’s rays warmed the room.

“Me, too.”

Suzy heard the baby’s squawk, heard her mother put the phone down, then pick it up again. “Let me think...He left you with the neighbors? I —will —kill — him.”

“Mom?!?” That was not Suzy’s intention.

“You’ll be good for the neighbors, best behavior?”

“I try,” Suzy said. “I had a fist fight with the girl my age.”

“What?”

“She wanted my dad to be hers.” Suzy felt the same fire inside. He was Suzy’s!

Joanie sighed. “Oh, honey.”

“You’ll come get me?”

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At the end of a beach day, Suzy and Jaycee chalked a hopscotch board on their shared drive. They both looked up at the sound of a car pulling in.

At the wheel: Suzy’s cousin Laura and Tom, Laura’s boyfriend. Suzy ran to the car.

“You’re here, you’re here, I can go home! I’ll go pack.”

“Hold on!” Laura got out of the car and stretched. “We drove 1,287 miles. We’re going to stay a few days.”

Tom, wearing an M for Michigan shirt, piped up. “Classes start again September 5th. We have more than a week. We’ll get you back.”

Laura knelt to Suzy’s height. “Nanny and Gumma gave us money for gas. Your mom and Aunt Suzy gave us spending money. Little Dave asked us to bring back a big shell. You’ll show us around?”

Suzy hopped up and down. “The beach and the pier,” she gasped. “The sunsets! I know the surfers, they can teach you!”

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Suzy left with the same suitcase, now covered in stickers, that was small enough to fit under her father’s passenger seat. In it, Jaycee had placed a palm-topped pen and a self-addressed postcard. They’d be “twins” even at a distance.

Johnnie came by, more mad than sad, because she’d shared him with Jaycee. “Suzy Wilder, you’re the girl for me.” With his index finger making an X on his striped t-shirt, he crossed his heart. Then he got on his banana bike and rode off.

“Ready?” Laura asked.

Suzy nodded. From the back seat, she took a last look at the Florida street where she’d lived, with its hot pink houses, its pebble lawns. As she left this paradise, she filled with worry. When would she see her father again?

Joanie left the engine running and her wicker purse on the passenger seat. In the rear-view mirror she eyed three-year-old Nicky. "I have to run in the house for the grocery list. You stay in the car."

"Out!" Nicky let loose a flutter of kicks to the back of her seat. "Out, out, out! I wanna play."

"I'll be right back."

"Out," he pointed to the digging toys by the neighbors' fallout shelter.

Joanie turned off the engine, but left the keys in the ignition. She unhooked Nicky from his booster seat and watched him toddle to his playthings. Inside, the telephone rang: it was her mother, checking that they'd arrived home safely, that the kids were off to their first day of school. Also, had Joanie seen on the news that Checkers died? Would she see the yachtsman again? Had Joanie quit smoking? Receiver cradled in her shoulder, Joanie emptied the pan collecting water in the defrosting freezer and put away the washed and dried breakfast plates.

Fifteen minutes later, list in hand, Joanie returned to the driveway. No car. No car?

"Nicky?"

The little boy looked up.

"Where is my car?"

Nicky pointed across the street. "The lady taked it."

"Took," Joanie corrected him. "Did she say she'd bring it back?"

Nicky shook his head.

“She got in it and left?”

He nodded. “I fought it was you.”

“Th: t- h. Thought.”

Joanie walked to the end of her drive and looked both ways for her car. Kids borrowed each others’ bikes all the time. And Joanie had used her sister-in-law’s wagon last spring when her own was in the shop. Maybe Hilary needed a quart of milk.

Nicky was at her side. “Come with me.” They held hands and crossed the street, climbing the front steps of Hilary’s house, a split level with a half-brick facade. Joanie rang the bell. No reply. She rapped on the door. Nothing.

Joanie peered inside at the flagstone entry and open-tread stairs. She listened: Jack LaLanne’s “1-2-3-4, pull push” came from the tv. She pulled away from the window. Of course Hilary would be right back; she’d left the television on.

Joanie turned and looked both ways, taking in the mix of ranch, Cape Cod, center-hall Colonial homes, with their greened lawns staked by “All the Way with LBJ” signs. It was the first day of school, so there wasn’t the usual whirl of children playing tag or kick-the-can, no glint from the handlebars of bikes left on their sides. Station wagons were parked in other drive-ways; none were her paneled Bonneville.

Nick tugged on her hand. “C’we pick berries?”

“Good idea,” Joanie said. Blueberries grew in the wooded paths behind Hilary’s house.

Across the street, Suzanne stepped outside. “What are you two doing over there?”

Joanie returned to her side. “Are you friends with Hilary Berman?”

“She came home?”

“Where had she been?”

Suzanne circled the side of her head with a pointed finger, making the universal sign for crazy. “She left in an ambulance, middle of the day. You were away. It was all anyone talked about in July.” Suzanne lowered her voice. “Hilary gave herself an abortion, she lost a lot of blood. When she recovered, she was committed.”

Joanie caught her breath. “That’s awful.” Reflexively, Joanie patted her forearm, for her purse. It held her pack of Pall Malls and the mother-of-pearl lighter she’d bought herself when she’d earned her PhD. Gone, along with her car. “Hilary took my wagon.”

“You might want to call the police,” Suzanne advised. “Hilary and her husband fight.”

Inside her crisp summer dress, Joanie wilted.

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“Don’t cry.” The police chief handed Joanie a tissue. Around him, the station house buzzed: rings and beeps and the click click close of a file cabinet. Chief Hansen extracted a cigarette from the pack on his desk, lit it, and handed it to Joanie.

“You know me.”

“Some things you never forget. Joanie Sage, the pretty valedictorian smoking cigarettes behind the bleachers.”

“My parents disapproved.” She tapped the cigarette’s ashes in the tray. “They still do.”

Chief Hansen turned to Nicky. “Your mom was the smartest girl in our grade.”



“Not so sharp leaving my car running.”

The chief waved away her regret. “She’s probably at the mall. I’ll bet you have your wagon back by the end of the day.”

Joanie took a drag, then rolled the cigarette in her fingers. “I don’t think so.”

“To be on the safe side, I sent out an APB, and notified border patrol.” He reached for his phone. “Have you called Walt? He should know.”

“You have his number?”

Chief Hansen held up a finger, listened, then put down the phone. “He’s not in.”

“You speak often?”

“He has concerns, like any father.”

“You spy on me?”

Chief Hansen chuckled and leaned forward. “It’s a courtesy, Joanie.” He was close enough that she smelled bacon on his breath. He sat back. “Walt started calling after Dave was attacked by the dog. How is the little guy?”

“The scar is fading.” Joanie felt herself pale, recalling that day.

He shook his head. “I still have nightmares, taking that shot.”

“Dave doesn’t remember a thing.”

“Like Teflon.” The chief stood and walked Joanie to the door. “I’ll let you know if we hear something on your car.”

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Joanie rested on a slat bench outside the grocery store. Beside her, Nicky rode the coin-operated horse, happily, without locomotion. Joanie wanted another cigarette but didn't have the energy to go into the store for a fresh pack. She felt flattened. Like one of those rock em sock em robots, without any strings to get back up. She closed her eyes and listened to the world around her: a roll-top truck closing with a slither and clang, the rumble of a garage door, a sharp whistle signaling the end of recess. Someone in soft tennis shoes walking towards her, stopping in front of her. Joanie opened her eyes. "Dolly."

"I heard. What can I do for you?"

"A ride home?"

"Look at you, you're shaking." Dolly sat, unsnapped her bag, extracted a cigarette and lit it for Joanie. "What's next?"

"In ancient Rome, theft was punishable by death. Swift, agonizing, public."

Dolly giggled. "Oh, Joanie. It's a car."

"Flogging, beheading, crucifixion." Joanie took a drag. "Exile."

"Be kind. Maybe she'll bring it back."

Joanie sagged.

"Don't be glum, it's unattractive." Dolly lit a cigarette for herself. "How was your summer?"

Sun and sea, laughter, five o'clock cocktails. Her fling with the yachtsman. Joanie scratched her head. "I still have sand in my hair."

"Did Walt visit the kids?"

"That was the plan. He's assigned to a secret project out west."

“I don’t know how you manage without a husband. Do you think you’ll marry again?”  
Dolly asked. “I’d have Bill set you up with one of his attorneys but you know how he feels about divorce.”

“How can I marry again if I’m ineligible by divorce?”

“Mmmm. It is vexing.” Dolly straightened her tennis top. “I spent the summer working on my game. In singles I moved up to third. And doubles — with Betty Pine, do you know her, she’s marvelous — we’re ranked fifth. I have a match at two.”

“Congratulations.” Joanie realized that it was a day like any other for everyone else.

Dolly ground out her cigarette and stood. “I have to get a few things for dinner. Then I’ll give you a lift.”

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Joanie stood at the foot of her driveway chatting with officer George Parker, the young policeman who’d been sent to follow up on her morning report. It was just after dinner, not yet dark, around them the buzz of cicadas. Games of tag and touch football intersected, a group of girls played hop scotch on a board they’d drawn where Joanie’s car usually stood. The littlest kids, including Nicky, sprayed each other with a hose.

George’s youth and uniform attracted the neighbors (Any news? Should we lock our doors?) and lured teenagers. Girls flirted, boys wanted to know his rank. A steady crackle came from the dispatch radio in his squad car.

“You’re sure she’s not bringing back my car?”

George spoke quietly. “You —she — checked in to a Howard Johnson’s motor lodge outside Indianapolis just after two. Your I.D., your check, your car, your license plates.”

“Maybe she needed some R&R.”

George shook his head. “She would have gone north. Those hotels on Mackinac Island are nice this time of year.”

“She owns a cute two-tone Plymouth. Why take my wagon?”

“Her husband hid the keys.”

They turned at the rumble of a GTO pulling into the drive opposite.

“I need to check in with Mr. Berman.” George set his hand lightly on Joanie’s shoulder. “I’ll come by afterwards.”

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“Why didn’t she steal the Millers’ car, theirs is brand new.” Suzy raised her arms overhead, and spun like a ballerina. “And the Horns’.”

“We’re studying proba-ba-bility,” Dave said, hopping up and down. “With marbles.”

“Math for a random event,” Joanie said. “I left the keys in the ignition, which skews the sample.”

Joanie, who typically wore low heels, had laced up her red ladies Keds for the walk to school. Joanie liked a morning walk, she’d done it as a child, from the older side of town. She’d held her mother’s hand, reciting times tables or quizzing her brother on spelling. It was a differ-

ent time, of course: her mother hadn't had a car, or a job outside the home. It was from her mother that Joanie had learned Latin and Greek, which had set Joanie on her life's work.

"Will you date that policeman?" Suzy teased. "He's dreamy."

"He's 23. Your cousins are older than that."

"Josie's dad says you're a sexy mom."

"What's 'sexy'?" Dave asked.

"Attractive." Joanie eyed the zig zag scar that ran from behind Dave's ear to his breastplate. With his collared shirt, it was mostly covered.

"Wait up!" Suzy's friend Marilyn spilled from a car and joined them, leaning into the stroller. Nicky grabbed the girl's blonde braids and pulled, both of them laughing.

"My mom's dating a cop," Suzy shared with Marilyn.

"He asked me on a date," Joanie objected. "That's not the same as dating."

"My mom says you're a tart."

"What's that mean?" Dave asked.

"I asked the same thing," Marilyn admitted.

"The opposite of sweet," Suzy said.

"A tart is a woman who dresses like a flirt," Marilyn corrected her.

Dave tugged on his mother's hand. "Time me." He took off, running as fast as he could to the school door. "How fast?" He shouted, when he'd reached it.

"15 seconds," Joanie called. A tart? Joanie was a tenured professor of classical antiquity who dressed professionally. She looked around for Marilyn's mother's car, but she'd pulled away. The nerve!

In the scrum of children waiting to enter school, Marilyn and Suzy were still by her side. Joanie leaned over and spoke quietly but firmly: "What your mother said is unkind and untrue."

The girls nodded. Then Marilyn elbowed Suzy. "Tart, tart!" She called out, laughing.

"Momma-tart!" Suzy joined in, pointing at Joanie.

"Tart! Tart!" Marilyn repeated.

The doors opened, the children funneled in, leaving a stunned Joanie standing by the stroller. A tart? Her nose was always in a book...she wore cardigans...

Nicky twisted to look up at her. "Momma tart?"

"Momma smart."

They shared a smile. She would have a sit down with Suzy after school: ten year olds taunting her?

A police car pulled up beside them. "Mrs. Wilder, chief wants you to come in."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Three banks in two days," Chief Hansen explained. "Here's a photo of your car, here's a photo of her at First Trust and at Farmer's Savings. She's wanted in five Midwestern states. Her given name is Marjorie Temple."

"Not Hilary Berman?"

"Bob is for real; his wife is a fraud. We're in touch with the FBI. They think she targeted you. Look at these photos, Joanie. It could be you."

Joanie nodded.

“She’s a pro,” the chief said, reading from notes. “...writes up a withdrawal form, hands it to the teller. Always chooses the teller closest to the door. Uses handbag as visual shield. Other tellers can’t see the pistol she’s pointing. Mouths threat. Walks out calmly.”

“What’s the threat?”

The officers exchanged a look.

“Should I be concerned for my safety?” Joanie felt her hands tremble.

“It’s a good thing your little one insisted on getting out of the car.”

Joanie breathed in, then out, to calm herself.

“She has an accomplice. Released from Terre Haute last week. That’s why she’s at it again.” Chief Hansen read from the notes again. “‘Together, armed and dangerous.’ The feds have reason to believe they’ll come back.”

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Joanie couldn’t tell where the agents parked, how they came and went. They appeared, clean-cut men in dark suits and ties, white shirts. They were unfailingly polite: please and thank you, yes m’am, I’m not at liberty to say. They did not chat. Even her apple pie failed to loosen lips.

Joanie had questions. After she’d dried the dishes, put Nicky to bed, checked on Dave and on Suzy — lights out! Including flashlights — Joanie went outside. Maybe the night agent would open up.

Ray Farrell stood, took the offered plate and cup, seated himself again, nodded his thanks. Joanie sat herself in the swing. The night was clear and cool; she'd brought a thick throw to keep herself warm. She would have liked a late night smoke but the agents insisted on complete dark.

"Why do you think they'll come back?"

"I'm not allowed to say."

"Then no more pie."

Ray laughed, and took another bite. "Delicious."

"Why watch the Berman house if Hilary is gone?"

Another bite. "You're serious about the pie?"

"You're in my house."

"I could lose my job."

Joanie rose to leave.

"Wait, wait," he said, extending a hand. "You, you're — so pretty. And I'm going nuts out here by myself."

"I want answers."

Ray sat back and took another bite. He sipped his coffee. "Sit."

Joanie curled into the swing again. "Why will they return?"

"Cash." He spoke quietly.

"How much?"

"The Berman house has false floors, hidden cabinets, and an envelope taped under the refrigerator that holds three safe deposit keys." He leaned in, his voice just above a whisper.



“We’ve been after her — we didn’t know she’d become Hilary Berman, suburban wife — since her accomplice went to jail four years ago. We knew they’d hid the money; we didn’t know where.” He forked another bite.

Joanie shook her head. “Their backyard is a paradise. That’s where I get the apples.”

Ray coughed.

“Where’s Bob Berman?” Joanie asked.

“Protective custody. His ‘wife’ and her pal are a mean pair.”

“What a thing to discover: your spouse is a bank robber.”

“It could be worse, m’am.”

“Despot?”

“Assassin.”

“Pornographer.”

“Spy.”

“Cannibal.”

“That is unforgivable. M’am.”

“Call me Joanie.”

He sipped his coffee. “I have some questions.”

“That’s fair.”

He pointed to the coupe parked in the driveway. “Whose car?”

“My mom’s. She doesn’t drive much.”

“You’re a professor. What’s your expertise?”

“The rise and fall of the Roman Empire, its societal structure.”

“The scar on Dave’s neck?”

“The neighbor’s dog.” It was too gruesome to elaborate.

Ray kept to his list. “The children’s father? Where is he?”

Talking about Walt, and their failed marriage, made Joanie feel small. “He works for NASA.”

“The two of you are divorced?”

“Walt is an explorer. I, the children, the women he dates — no one is more important than the space race.”

“That sounds rehearsed.”

Joanie kept his gaze. “I liked being married. It’s a 24-hour love.”

“Sex?”

“That, too.”

Ray set aside his emptied plate. “How does something good go bad?”

“It starts with distance,” Joanie tapped a finger for the other reasons. “Lies. Betrayal. Humiliation.” Joanie felt her face flush with heat. “I’d call and hear a woman, or children in the background. I’d say, ‘Who are you with? Why are you with her and not me? Not us?’”

“That sounds awful.”

“It was,” Joanie said. “Then Suzy ran off with him, to Florida, when she was seven. It took every bit of strength not to follow.”

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Ray relaxed into their lives. He arrived at 3:30 for his 4 to midnight shift. At his break, he'd sit with Joanie and her children as they ate a dinner of chicken a la king, or meatloaf and mashed potatoes, sometimes accepting a plate for himself. If he didn't eat, he entertained. He'd balance a spoon on his nose, or show on a globe where he'd been stationed in the Navy, which left Suzy bug-eyed: *That dot in the Indian Ocean?* Dave was especially delighted to learn from Ray how to do an arm fart.

"Thanks for that," Joanie said, later, when she brought a square of fruit crumble and a cup of coffee to Ray. "I'll hear from his teacher tomorrow."

"A well-behaved child is an oxymoron."

"I suppose." Joanie sat and wrapped herself in a throw blanket. "I worried the divorce would sour them. That's why we spend summers with my parents. They have the life I had: smothered in books and kindness."

"I was up a dawn feeding the chickens." Ray rubbed his hands together for warmth. "If I slept in I'd get the belt."

"What were you like as a child?"

"Fearless, except for that belt."

"Snakes, spiders, jellyfish."

"There's nowhere I'd rather be than the ocean." Ray sipped his coffee.

"I was stung twice, once in the rump."

"It's your wiggle."

"And sharks," she added.

"Polar bears."

“What are the chances?”

“I hiked northern Quebec. They scared the hell out of me.” Ray raised his binoculars and focused on the Berman house. “If I asked, would you go on a date with me?”

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Joanie blotted her lipstick. She swayed to a Sinatra LP playing on her Victrola.

Dave used his finger on a loose tooth. “I think you should date agent Farrell.”

Joanie bit back a smile. “Why?” She applied mascara.

Dave was stretched flat on Joanie’s bedroom floor, reading *Henry Huggins* and wriggling the loose tooth with his tongue. Nicky rolled a toy race car along the carpet, up the short leg of her dresser, along its base, down to the floor again and over Dave’s bare feet, which made Dave laugh. They were both clean and bathed and in their pajamas.

“Ray likes sports.” Dave looked up from his book. “He taught me a trick to memorize prime numbers, he...” Dave rolled and sat up. He grabbed his forearm and set his mouth to it, executing a loud fart.

“Charming. The fellow I’m dating is a university professor.”

“Ray wears a knife strapped to his ankle.”

“Really?” Joanie finished with a light dusting of face powder.

Dave was on his knees, bouncing up and down. “He said, he said, a knife is better in a fight. You don’t have to, to reload.”

“Oh!” Joanie pinned her blonde hair back with a black velvet bow. “That sounds like something from a movie.”

Dave kept bouncing. “What if my tooth falls out?”

“Put it under your pillow.” Joanie clasped a starburst earring on one, then the other lobe.

Suzy appeared in the doorway and stretched herself across its span. “The babysitter is here.”

Joanie checked the time on her dress watch.

“I like your dress.”

“Thank you.”

“You smell good,” Suzy added.

Joanie turned from the mirror. “You don’t want me to go.”

Suzy exaggerated a frown. “Stay home and watch *Flipper* with us.”

“Don’t go!” Nicky called.

Joanie placed her lipstick, tissues and breath mints in her silk evening bag and snapped it closed. She took a last look in the mirror. Nicky crawled over and wrapped his arm on her ankle. Joanie moved, awkwardly, toward the door, dragging him.

“Nicky’s going on the date!”

Suzy blocked the door. Dave folded an arm around Joanie’s other leg. “Take me, too!”

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Joanie eased her way into the booth. “Sorry I’m late.”

“I hope you don’t mind. I ordered martinis.”

Joanie wrapped her fingers around the cold stem and raised her glass. “Here’s to getting out of the house. I had to pry them off and promise them custard.”

“I’d sell my soul for a Golden Cone.”

“Come with us.”

“I thought we were a secret.”

“It’s just custard.”

Ray raised his glass. “It’s nice to be part of something domestic after the military.”

Joanie shed her shoe and felt, with her foot, for Ray’s ankle.

Ray smiled, enjoying her touch. “I don’t know why ... but don’t stop.”

“I’m looking for your knife.”

“I left it at home.” Ray spread his hands, indicating the set table, its lit candle and bowl of gardenias. “This is a date.”

She patted his side. “Did you bring your gun?”

“I’m unarmed.” He turned her face to his. “Look at you, Joanie.” He touched the bow in her hair. “The dress, your perfume.”

Had they ever been so close? Joanie put a hand to his sun-kissed cheek, his straw-colored hair. “Clean shave, fresh cut.”

Joanie overheard the couple at the next table commenting on them — look at those love-birds — so she turned away, to the long menu. “Do you mind if I order the filet?”

“We’ll start with oysters.”

“And share a wedge.” Joanie tilted her head, listening. “Do you like the band?”

“They’re a little square.” Ray slowly snapped his fingers.

Joanie looked around, taking in the supper club’s velvet furnishings, its palm trees, white-clothed tables and stylish diners. She craned, studying a woman’s beehive hairdo, wondering how she could do that to her own hair. “What a swell place you chose.”

“I’ve been thinking of this since the day I first saw you.”

Joanie arched an eyebrow.

“Maybe the second.” He smiled and slid his hand over hers. “You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Divorced?”

He laughed. “Scholar, mother, absent ex.” He sipped his cocktail. “You remind me of people I served with in the navy. Unflappable.”

“Go on.” She laughed, enjoying the compliment.

“Your confidence is attractive.” He ran his finger along her knuckles. “Sexy.”

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Hand in hand they walked down the steps into the cool night air. The supper club’s red sign pulsed on, then off, spreading its color. The walkway was staked with “LBJ for the USA” and “Save Our Rights” signs. Fall leaves crunched underfoot.

“Now it’s me who doesn’t want to give you up,” Ray said.

Joanie sighed. “The babysitter awaits.”

“Share a smoke?”

They leaned against the back of Ray's car, Joanie pulling her wool coat close. From the restaurant they could hear the band playing, and moved together to the beat of "In the Mood".

"Is there anything as good as sex?" Ray asked, handing the cigarette to Joanie.

"It really is the best." She pursed her lips, and blew smoke rings.

"Saving a life."

"Holding your newborn."

"Re-entering the U.S." Ray pointed to the sky. "Spotting Triangulum."

Joanie followed, and found the star. "A clean kitchen."

"Don Larsen's perfect game."

"Gold Medal Flour on sale."

"Your apple pie."

\*\*\*\*\*

Afternoons they spent together at a motel close to campus. It was the only time of day Joanie and Ray were free; he before work and she just after. It was the place they shook off their roles, where they could love and look at one another unseen by others. They shared a laugh over the room's bright green bed spread and the hand-tooled wall map. How much of the state had each of them explored? To Bonner's in Frankenmuth for Christmas things. Spring tulips in Holland. The dunes along Lake Huron.



Joanie had arrived first today, and sat in an armchair looking at her reflected self: dressed for work in a plaid pencil skirt, wool mock neck, pale hose, low square heels —which she kicked off. Everything else she kept on. Ray liked to undress her, liked to loose her blonde curls.

She picked up a *Life* magazine and tried to read about Brezhnev's rise to power but couldn't concentrate. What was keeping Ray? What a pleasure to be in his arms! To be desired. Of course she had considered the risk. Joanie was ducking out of office hours; Ray was forbidden to fraternize. They could both lose their jobs.

She felt alive. That had to matter. Without Ray, her days would stretch out endlessly same same same: kids, work, cooking, cleaning, dis-invitations for cocktails, for dinner parties. Ray made her think and laugh; she could see sharing a life with him.

The key turned in the lock. Joanie rose, letting Ray envelope her. How many times would they get away with this? Coupling, then relaxing in each others warmth and wit.

"What stops you from going into the Berman house and taking the money," Joanie asked.

"Some of us have."

"Naughty." She pinched him. "Whose money is it?"

"The agency that recovers it."

"What would you do with a cash grab?"

"I'd buy you a big diamond ring."

Joanie smiled. Ray turned on his back and looked up at the ceiling's squares. "I have an idea for a security business that doesn't rely on manpower. Or dogs."

"You'd put agents out of work?" Joanie scooted herself upright, leaned over and lit a cigarette.

“Watching that house is torture. Parts of my brain are dying.”

“Death by boredom?”

Ray held out his hand for the cigarette and took a drag. “I’d rather be hit by lightning.”

“Drown.”

He agreed. “No place I’d rather be.”

“The Bomb?”

“It would be quick.”

“In your sleep.” Joanie said, running her index finger along the hard ridge of his clavicle.

“So peaceful.”

“Not if you share a room with your brothers.”

She took back the cigarette and laid it in the tray. “Pleurisy.”

“Can that kill you?”

“I think you want to die.” Joanie pulled him close. “Covered in honey,” she murmured.

“Stung by bees.”

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Joanie sat in the Mercury Comet she’d borrowed from her mother, outside her home. She brought her hands to her face, breathing in the smell of sex. Afternoons with Ray had made her whole again.

Suzu knocked on the window. “The babysitter needs to leave.”

Joanie rolled it open. “Hello to you, too.”

Suzy walked around and slid into the passenger seat. “We had a mock election in school today.”

“Who won?”

“President Johnson. One grade conspired and voted for Goldwater.”

Joanie chuckled.

“Charlie Klug voted for his dog. So did his brothers.”

“Finally, a third party candidate.” Joanie smiled and gathered her bags to go inside.

“Wait.” Suzy fiddled with the radio’s buttons, even though the car was turned off. “I talked to Dad. I asked to live with him.”

“During the summer?”

“Now.”

“He lives in a trailer with three other men.”

“That project ended. He’s back in Florida.” She mimicked her father. ““The lunar landing vehicle is a success!””

“Why do you want to leave?” Joanie wasn’t sure she could bear losing her again, but she knew Suzy needed to see her father. She lit up when Walt called. “Daddy, daddy!” Suzy read him her A+ plus grade reports, tattled on Marilyn for stealing lipstick, demanded he hold up the phone so she could hear the waves crash.

“I don’t like the agents in our house.”

“Not even Ray?”

“Ray is okay,” Suzy agreed. “He’s teaching me to box.” Suzy raised her fists. “I’m ready, but what if the robbers come back and take Dave? Or Nicky? Or you?” Suzy lowered her hands.

“I’ve had that nightmare,” Joanie admitted.

Suzy frowned. “I wish we could go back in time.”

“Before my car was stolen?”

“When you and Dad were married.”

“I used to wish that, too.”

Suzy reached for the door handle. “Daddy said no. I can’t live with him. He works too much.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Joanie closed the door to her office and sat down again at her desk. The type written note, from her department head, was clear: Joanie was suspended until the fall semester of next year. Her grade reports had been late, she’d neglected office hours, there had been multiple complaints from students. She would not be paid, she must empty her office. As a courtesy, she might find advisors for her graduate students.

Joanie set the note on her leather desk blotter, and let her head fall into her raised hands. How could she have been so foolish? Walt contributed to the household, but it was her salary that kept them in their suburban home. She paid for Suzy’s ballet lessons, for the athletic gear Dave kept outgrowing, for Nicky’s sitter. How selfish she’d been, falling in love.

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“Don’t — touch — me,” Joanie said. “You should leave.”

Ray didn’t move. The kitchen clock ticked past ten. The children were asleep, the kitchen dark. There was no red light signaling freshly made coffee, no pan of cooling brownies.

“I understand why you’re punishing yourself,” Ray said. “Why punish us?”

“Because everything about us is wrong,” Joanie began. “What do we have in common? You didn’t even finish college. You believe in war, in the military-industrial complex. You’re its product. A cog.”

Joanie’s insult hung in the air.

“You really think that?” He asked. “I thought we’d marry.”

Joanie wiped away a tear. “I did, too.”

Ray took her small hand in his and stroked the edge of her palm.

She took it back. “You’ll lose your job.”

“I’m crazy about you, Joanie.”

“I’m a divorced mother of three who adore their father.”

“I see that,” he said gently. “When he calls they drop everything.”

“Where would you fit in? Who would you be to them?”

“I’d be Ray.”

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After that, agent Paul Blick handled the night shift. Joanie was polite, of course, offering pie and coffee, which he took black. Unlike Ray, he did not stand up every time Joanie walked in

to or out of the room. Unlike Ray, he did not talk sports with Dave or bet him \$1 on the Lions-Packers game Sunday. He did not bounce Nicky on his knee, did not wrestle words from Suzy to complete the daily crossword. Paul Blick did his job: he watched the Berman home for the Bon-neville Bandits.

Joanie had to ask. "Do you know agent Farrell?"

"Good guy."

"Do you know where he is? One of the other houses?" She cut a piece of pound cake and served it to Paul, along with a cup of his uncreamed coffee.

"Kansas City?" He blew on his coffee, then took a sip. "They do forensic accounting there." He shook his head. "You're in a room looking at bank records. I couldn't do it."

Kansas City? Joanie steadied herself against the kitchen chair, overcome.

"Are you okay, Mrs. Wilder?"

"Something I ate. Pardon me."

He picked up his plate and coffee and went outside.

Joanie covered her mouth with her hand. Ray, gone for good. She let her hand drop, then moved to the sink, so she could wash the dinner dishes. Soap, scrub, brush away a tear. Why had she said those things? They had so much in common! A love for each other, for her her children. For charred steak and salad dressed with blue cheese. Jack Paar to Johnny Carson, Buddy Holly to the Beatles. He was the adult with whom she could share her day: the student she had to fail, parking lot wars, the red pencil debate.

Joanie had no one to blame but herself. She'd pushed him away.

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Suzy rapped on the bathroom door. "Mom?"

Joanie sat on top of the closed toilet, head down, weeping.

"Momma?" Suzy pounded. "Mom!"

Joanie pulled a length of tissue and balled it, wiping her face. She opened the door a bit.

"We're ready to go," Suzy said. "I got Nicky dressed and made scrambled eggs and toast 'cuz we're out of cereal. And milk."

Joanie closed her eyes.

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Joanie parked in the reserved lot at the local high school, where she taught Latin 4 (Virgil's *The Aeneid*), Latin 1 (the alphabet, simple grammar) and was advisor to 27 sophomores whose surnames ran from Ga - Mc. She'd applied for the job using her maiden name, Sage, because that's the name she used as a scholar and it was the name on her new driver's license. Did she want to be a new Joanie? Not really: but she couldn't risk being mistaken for the Joan Sage Wilder who was wanted in 10 Midwestern states.

Joanie was driving her mother's Comet, which was smaller and faster than her wagon and more fun to drive. Was that Joanie's only fun?

Yes.

Joanie could not get out from under her unhappiness. She'd lost eight pounds, she couldn't keep her students' names straight, her pale pink coated nails were cracked and chipped. The kitchen faucet provided a constant drip - drip - drip. Outside, wet leaves layered her lawn. She sat in the dark smoking, ignoring the agents' request that she not. She put her heels on again, she tipped and tapped and clicked and clacked. Instead of sleep, she puzzled: was it the forgotten grocery list that started this bad luck? Did it go back farther, was the root of this her failed marriage? If that was so, was the seed of her present misfortune that spring day in 1951 when she'd met Walt in the university library? She in her pleated skirt and button up cardigan, he in his gray flannels and pea coat. Truman was president, the Rosenbergs were convicted, Doris Day wedded for the third time. Joanie and Walt had walked hand in hand, on their second date, to see *The Man from Planet X* at the Michigan Theater. Walt's idea, but Joanie had loved its quiet suspense and sitting beside a college man so good looking he turned heads.

It was a comfort speaking to Walt again. A lost love? Of course Walt could sympathize. His advice: make a formal request of the FBI to remove her home as a lookout. (She did: they complied.) Join a tennis group. Walk the arboretum with her mother. All good ideas. Still, Joanie could not get over Ray. Asked on a date by the physics teacher, Joanie fibbed and said she was otherwise involved. Did Ray miss her? Why hadn't he called? Sent a note, a message?

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Thanksgiving night Joanie returned alone from her parents' dinner. Nicky had fallen asleep in the den watching *Lassie*. Dave and Suzy had begged for, and received permission, to sleep over with their visiting cousins.

Along the street and in her driveway were the cars of her neighbors' relatives. Their homes were lit later than usual. She heard the "sounds like" of charades, the tired pleas of children asking to stay up. A fresh snow whitened the lawns, the parked cars. Joanie ran a gloved finger along one car, then the next, like her children would — until: could it be? Her Bonneville?

Joanie spun and saw the Berman's garage bay open, emptied. Joanie stilled herself and listened — were they here? — but heard only the pounding of her heart and *Camelot* playing on the neighbor's Victrola.

Joanie circled her car: its right side was dented and scratched, its mirror cracked. The tires were bald. She opened the driver's door and slid in; the interior held the smell of sweat, fries, and spilled beer. Keys were in the ignition, her wicker bag was on the console. She opened the bag: it held her mother-of-pearl lighter and a bound wad of \$100 bills.

The looping red light of a police car colored her space. In the mirror she saw black sedans roar in from both directions, stopping short. Agents swarmed the Berman house.

A hard knock on the window startled her. Joanie rolled it open.

"I ..." Seeing Ray, Joanie lost her words.

"I did, too."

"Where have you been?" Joanie managed, her mind a scramble of emotions. Was she mad or glad?

"Not far." He set his hands on the door.

“Why — why didn’t you call?”

“I had to think.”

### Life is Here/Chapter 3

On her knees, Gigi spoke her sins: selfishness, vanity, impatience, dread.

Father Brennan pushed a lit cigarette through the grate. "Let us pray: 'Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness, according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.'"

Gigi exhaled. "'Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.'"

Father continued. "'For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.'"

Gigi took another drag, then set the cigarette on the ledge. "It's not working."

"Five Hail Mary's."

"My mind wanders. I sin while I'm praying."

Father muffled a laugh. "Mrs. Bourne."

"Please. Gigi."

"You've been to the cemetery today?"

"I swept the snow from her grave."

"Abide in Christ."

Gigi tapped the cigarette's ashes. "I'm trying."

Through the grail, Gigi saw him bow his head and raise his hand to make the sign of the cross. "May God in his love enlighten your heart, that you may remember in truth all your sins and his unfailing mercy."

Gigi blessed herself, stamped out the cigarette, and left the booth.

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Gigi settled herself at the window seat, wrapping close her silver mink. She fingered the beads of her rosary, but didn't pray. Clack — clack — clack, the steady rhythm of wheels on track was a balm. Outside, the sun on snow was bright. Gigi wore the oversized sunglasses she'd carried with her since Kitty died. Most days, the glasses were the only way she could be out in the world. She could be unseen but still see.

During yesterday's storm she'd stayed in bed (not) reading fashion magazines while the children played outside in the snow, came inside for hot cocoa, played Twister and Sorry!

Today she had slept late and bathed, hearing her children leave for school. Even the youngest, Nora, went to pre-K. Gigi had dressed, put on makeup, slipped on her coat and stopped in the kitchen for coffee only.

Her children had moved on with their lives, they grew and changed grades and got braces and won the math prize. Tony had returned to work; distribution was now in eight states, he'd signed three more brewers. Gigi was the only one stuck.

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At Grand Central, Gigi stepped from the train into a thick crowd of protesters. How unusual! She was jostled, as though in a rough sea. Would she fall, be trampled? She felt herself righted by two young women in hippy garb, who slipped their arms through Gigi's.

“March with us,” one said, keeping hold of her.

“I’m going to the museum,” Gigi explained.

“It’s life or death!”

Outside, they merged into a slow stream of single-minded people. Along the street, garbage spilled from burlap bags and overflowed their aluminum cans. Gigi brought her gloved hand over her nose. “I forgot about the strike.”

“Another reason to march,” one of them explained. “Wage inequity.”

“Women’s rights!”

“Civil rights!”

“Equal pay!”

It was a cacophony: a jack hammer’s rat tat tat tat, the hiss of steam, a taxi’s honk!!! The crowd’s calls to End the War, Bring our Boys Home!

Gigi glanced at her companions. The brunette on her left wore round purple-lens glasses and a beaded headband; she introduced herself as Jill. On Gigi’s right was Winnie, a blonde with bangs wearing a shaggy sheep shearling. They seemed to know her. They lived in the same town, their daughters were in preschool with Nora. Hippies in Scarsdale? Gigi thought. They’d recognized Gigi on the train, so chic, but didn’t want to disturb her. Everyone knew Gigi was bereft.

“I don’t want to be pitied,” Gigi said, though she wasn’t sure they heard her.

They walked on, arm in arm with the crowd, at a slow pace. Gigi found herself singing along with “What are you fighting for?” and “Where have all the flowers gone?” Was it the pot smoke or the stacked garbage that smelled like skunk? Last Saturday she and Tony had been

right where she was marching now, they'd seen the musical *Sweet Charity* and had a late dinner at Joe Allen's. Had she enjoyed either? Noticed its star actors? Tasted the steak?

Police shifted the marchers north along Fifth Avenue. By the time they reached Central Park, the crowd was funneled off the street. With more space, the crowd thinned; the women loosened their protective hold on Gigi and headed to a bench. Jill set down her sign and lit a cigarette. "Enough marching."

Gigi bought a hot pretzel, sharing it with the others. They sat in the sun, savoring the salty warmth.

Winnie checked her watch. "Do you have to get home for your kids?"

"Not today," Gigi said, embarrassed of the truth. How could a mother stop mothering? Since Kitty died, she'd been too drugged or distracted to care for her children. "Honestly, I'm not sure who does what," Gigi admitted. "We have a housekeeper. My husband drives. The older children look after the younger?" Gigi shook her head. "I eat dinner with them, I hear about the day."

"Our friend sees you at the cemetery. 'Always beautifully dressed.'"

"I go every day."

Led by a nun, a line of school girls passed. "I see my daughter everywhere. That girl" — she pointed — "with her hair pulled high, like a dancer, and her socks at her ankles because they itch." Gigi turned back to the women. "I see her in her siblings, in my son's blonde curls, in her sister's laugh.

"Is that a comfort?" Winnie wondered.

"If she's alive in them, why isn't she alive with us?"

“Have you gone for counseling?”

Gigi chuckled.

“Grief takes time.”

“It will never end.” Gigi lit her own cigarette off of Jill’s. “I remember when I was a good mother. Teaching the older ones the twist while the little ones napped. Rolling pastry to make a giant croissant.” Gigi spread her hands to the size of sheet pan. “I loved being a mother. *Their* mother.”

“Like riding a bike?”

“That’s missing a pedal.” Gigi took a drag. What was a mother who can’t mother? Why go on? “What about the two of you? Do you have to get home?”

“We take Thursdays off.” Winnie smiled. “Since the girls were newborns. Our in-laws take them. We see shows at the Modern, we lunch at the Russian Tea Room, we shop.”

Jill took off her head band and purple-hued glasses. Winnie reversed her coat so the shaggy side was its lining. Unadorned they looked like younger versions of Gigi.

“We’re going to an art opening downtown,” Jill said.

“A happening,” Winnie added. “You should come with us.”

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The art was unlike any Gigi had seen in museums: there was a neon box, a triangle of steel, a black canvas. Jill turned and summoned the gallery owner to negotiate a price, then wandered off with Winnie in search of wine.

“Your friends are my best customers,” the gallery owner said to Gigi. “They buy a piece, or two, every time they come.” He extended his hand. “I’m Peter.”

“Gigi.” She didn’t mind his gaze. “How did you get into this business?”

“I own the building.” He turned to sign a bill. “I get a cut of sales.”

Gigi heard Europe in his words. “Where are you from?”

“You first.”

“Paris. We left after the war.”

With his fingers, Peter ticked off his stops. “Kiev, Strasbourg, Queens. We spoke Yiddish at home.” He indicated the art buyers. “These blue bloods — they have no idea, the privation.”

Gigi mimicked a hand off. “Feeding the fire with our furniture,” Gigi recalled. “We couldn’t get warm.”

“Eating insects.”

“My parents never looked back,” Gigi said.

“We would have stayed in Strasbourg.”

Gigi nodded, understanding.

“I went from Pyotr Friedmann to Pierre Friedman to Peter Mann.”

“It suits you.” Gigi smiled. “And your sideburns.”

“If I shaved I’d be someone else?”

“Less interesting.”

“I like your bob.” He fingered its edge.

Gigi enjoyed his touch. “Tell me more about the building. Thirty foot ceilings?”

Jill joined them, fanning herself. “Could you open the windows?”



“The stench would drive everyone away,” Peter pointed out. “Go up to the roof if you need air.”

Jill indicated the art work she’d purchased, a series of boxes lit from within. “You’ll have them sent?”

“After the show closes,” Peter said.

Jill turned to Gigi. “We’re heading to the station. Share a cab?”

Gigi shook her head. “I’m having a nice time.”

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They collapsed on his bed, half dressed. Peter lit a cigarette and handed it to Gigi, then rolled over and opened her purse, shaking out its contents: rosary, lipstick, house key, wallet.

“Who is this woman who has sex with a man she’s just met?” He opened her wallet.

“Genevieve R. Bourne. What’s the R for?”

“Roget.” Gigi put the cigarette aside and pulled off her stockings..

“The clothing designer?”

“Yes.” She took up the cigarette again, and relaxed against a pillow. The space was raw: brick walls, timbered ceilings, track lighting, a potbelly stove.

Peter flipped through her wallet. “Bendel’s, Bergdorf’s, Bloomingdale’s. Library card, Mass card, 5 cent stamps.” Another compartment yielded photographs, which he set down on the bed as though he were playing cards. “Girl, boy, girl, girl, girl, toddler.”

Gigi exhaled, then slid Kitty’s photo from the line. “She died last summer.”

“I’m sorry.”

“She hit her head on the diving board. We were all there, at the pool. A hot summer day.”

Gigi tapped the ashes into a tray. “I don’t know how to go on.”

“My wife Edie died three years ago this April.”

“Does she visit you?”

“Not as much,” Peter said. “But she’s never far. Just out of reach.” He pointed to an oversized portrait of a woman, which centered his living space.

He turned back to Gigi, who’d put her finger on the photo of a fair haired boy with curls. “That’s Jamie,” she said. “He’s 13. If he weren’t underage he’d be incarcerated.” She tapped on the young girls in the middle. “That’s Maude and that’s Jayne. They still love me.” She spread her fingers, indicating the oldest and the youngest. “Meg is 15 and newly angry at me. Little Nora prefers the housekeeper.” Gigi sat back. “They’re naughty, at the cemetery. We go Sundays after Mass. Tony holds my hand, Meg pouts. The others run around, they whoop and holler, they chase the geese. They have no reverence.”

Peter pulled out another photo, of Gigi and Tony. “He looks like one of those Irish toughs who used to beat me up.”

“He may have,” Gigi said. “He’s gentle with us.”

“I’d be terrified to cheat on him.”

Gigi shrugged. “This — sex — it’s the only thing that makes me feel alive.”

Peter put down the photo. “I remember that.”

Peter pulled apart her lipstick, and turned her to face him. Carefully, he applied its frosty pink. “You took my breath away when you walked in.” He put the lipstick back together, and put

it in her bag. He rose, buckled his pants, and reached for a stack of business cards. He put one in her bag. “I’d like to see you again.” He finished dressing. “Shall I call you a car?”

Gigi turned. “Zip me?”

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Leaving Peter’s apartment, Gigi heard laughter and James Brown, the steel door closing with a clank.

Gigi climbed one flight, then another, her snow boots soundless on the treads. Out on the roof, Gigi caught her breath: ah, so dark, and cold! She looked beyond the city lights to the night sky. “Kitty?”

“Momma?”

“I’m right here.”

Gigi opened her purse. She took out the rosary and wrapped it in her hands. She bowed her head. “‘Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.’” She blessed herself, and stepped up and onto the parapet. She spread her arms wide, and launched herself.

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“Let us pray.”

Gigi woke to the warmth of a man’s hand on hers.

Father Brennan continued. “...I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee...

Gigi picked up, weakly. “And I detest my sins most sincerely because they displease Thee, my God...

“Who are so deserving of all my love...” Father Brennan withdrew his hand. Gigi saw him look around the sun-filled hospital space. “You have your Tony to thank for getting you out of the psychiatric ward.”

Gigi nodded. Her left arm and right leg were in casts.

“He’s very upset.”

“Of course,” Gigi said quietly.

“That you left — tried to leave — on your own.”

“It was selfish of me.”

Father Brennan rocked back in his chair. “Aquinas says it’s an act against God for which one cannot repent.”

Gigi blinked. “There’s no forgiveness.”

“Not in our faith.” Father patted his suit jacket for cigarettes. “I’d light you one but it’s not permitted.”

Gigi closed her eyes; the tears fell anyway. Gigi knew Church rules. She’d attempted suicide, so she would no longer receive communion, would no longer be welcome at Mass.

Father brought his hands together in prayer. “For Thy infinite goodness and most amiable perfections: and I firmly purpose by Thy holy grace...”

Gigi finished the contrition, “Never more to offend Thee.”

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“Momma! Wake up!”

Gigi stirred. “Kitty?”

“I’m Jayne.”

Gigi focused on the girl standing at her bedside, her long hair the color of mahogany, her blue eyes big, like Tony’s.

“Maude would have come but she has a violin recital.”

The muffled street noise — honks, sirens — reminded Gigi of her place on a high floor in a city hospital. “How did you get here?”

“Papa drove me.”

“He won’t come in?”

Jayne shook her head. “He went to pray.”

Gigi blinked back tears but down they rolled. “Thank you for coming to see me.”

Jayne leaned over to smell the lilies.

“My brother sent them.”

Jayne’s already big eyes opened wider. “All the way from India?”

Gigi reached for the card. “He’s back in Paris.” She read it again, and handed it to Jayne.

“He hopes I’m well.”

Jayne looked at the penned note. “Will you teach me French?”

“You sing in French. *A la clair fontaine/m’en allant promener...*”

*“J’ai trouvé l’eau si belle/que je m’y suis baigné...”* “Jayne swayed as she sang, and bumped the bed.

Gigi caught her breath. Ah! The pain! “Sit, please.”

Jayne did as told, but couldn’t keep still. “I wanted to tell you! Maude and I live with Queenie and Papa now. We go to a new school. It’s all girls.”

Gigi gulped: her children, scattered. “Do you like your new school?”

“I do! The nuns are nice. So are the girls. No one rolls up bits of paper to make spit balls. No one trips you and then says, ‘It’s ‘cuz I like you.’”

“You’re a good student.”

“I am,” Jayne smiled. “They wanted to put me in fourth grade but Daddy said no.”

“How are the others? Do you see them?”

“Sundays.” Jayne looked up, thinking about her answer. “Meg went on a date. Jamie was sus- pe”

“Suspended?”

“That’s the word. For shaking the vending machine to get sodas. That made Daddy angry. Madder than — no, hotter than — the gates of hell.” Jayne kicked her boots — ba boomp, ba boomp — at the chair’s legs.

Did Gigi miss the noise of children?

“Nora learned to read! She sounds out everything.” Jayne picked a word on the wall. “Hi-le flam-ma-bl.”

Gigi saw Jayne’s eyes move from the wall to the ward’s patients. Like Gigi, the women were broken or bruised or beaten. “Don’t stare.”

Jayne turned back to her mother. "There's a new maid, her name is Nellie and she..."

Jayne pursed her lips, "'tawks lak thees.' She dresses like Mary Poppins and when she leaves the house she wears a cloak." Jayne swooned. "She's in love with Dec, he's Papa's driver. He drops us at school on the way to Papa's office. Queenie picks us up. Sometimes we stop at Schrafft's for ice cream if we don't have ballet or music. I'm on book 3 in piano."

Jayne reached over and picked up the drawing pad at Gigi's side. She turned its pages, then stopped. "I like this one, only without the bow. Boys tug on them."

Gigi leaned in. "What if the bow were in front?"

Jayne nodded, and turned to another page. "Do they make you draw?"

"It's called art therapy. I'm supposed to paint flowers but I like sketching dresses."

A nurse entered and spoke to Jayne. "Two minutes."

"Okay!"

Jayne scooted her chair very close to the bed and spoke quietly. "Daddy said you're not coming home."

Gigi nodded.

"I came because I wanted you to know where to find me."

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"Was it something I said?" Peter put a vase with pink tea roses on her bedside table, and pulled up the chair.

"About your wife," she extended her free hand, "just out of reach."

“In another dimension,” he said dryly. He’d brought fashion magazines. “You’ll need these.”

Gigi smiled. Such a good looking man, with his going grey hair cut close, his herringbone jacket, the slight smell of cigarettes. “What I’d do for a smoke.”

He patted her cast. “What a mess. The police, your husband.”

Gigi shifted uneasily; her leg hurt. “What’s going on in the world?”

“Peggy Fleming won the gold. Soviets won the ice hockey, over Canada. It’s hard to root against one’s people but,” he tapped his heart. “I must. The bastards.”

“The war?”

“Cronkite says it’s a stalemate.”

“New York?”

Peter breathed deeply. “The garbage strike ended!” He eyed the rosary by her bedside. “Those were wrapped in your hand.”

“The last thing I said was a contrition.”

“The best time for one,” he joked.

“I should have committed myself,” Gigi admitted. “The itch inside these casts is maddening.”

“Saved by the garage strike. You landed in burlap piles.”

“What did the police want?”

“Your state of mind. They knew you’d been at the march earlier in the day, and they found hallucinogens in my place. So that’s how they wrote you up: drug-induced psychosis.”

Gigi chuckled. “Anything but grief.”



“Will you go back to your husband?”

“We’ll never divorce.”

“I understand,” Peter said, and gathered his coat to leave.

“It’s a long recovery. You’ll visit again?”

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Gigi heard voices but couldn’t make out the words. She sat in a wheelchair, still encased in casts, her rosary in hand. On her lap was a wool blanket, which kept her warm in the cool spring air. The sun! She closed her eyes, soaking in its warmth. Over their words — trauma, suicide — she heard the clatter of birds, a chorus of frogs. To complete her recovery, Gigi had been moved from the hospital to a facility in the suburbs. She opened her eyes: beyond the deck where she was seated a broad lawn sloped to a pond ringed with trees just beginning to green. A spray of forsythia yellowed a section; a fat magnolia was fully pink.

Tony dragged over a chair. He leaned in, very close, just as he had at the hospital. She loved the woody scent of his shaving cream, the soft wool of his suit. He took her free hand in his and held it tightly to his face. He wept, which made Gigi cry, too. Would their sorrow never end?

He snuffled. “I’m not happy about this.”

Gigi squeezed his hand. “Doctors orders.”

Tears fell on Tony’s smooth face. “I’m losing you again.” He reached for her rosary and played with its beads. “I try to say it but I only get as far as ‘Glory be.’”

“It’s a solace.” Gigi gulped. “Do you — do you — go to her grave?”

“Not as much.” With his handkerchief he dabbed her face, then his own. “Papa and Queenie visit.” Tony sat back. There was space between them now. “Tell me — tell me — how you got the job.”

Gigi brightened even though her head hurt, from crying. “With my father’s name. She’s thrilled that I worked in his atelier when I was a teenager.”

“And it comes with a place to live?”

Gigi nodded. “Above the shop.”

“It sounds like a radical treatment.”

Gigi agreed. “I’m no use to anyone back home in bed.”

Tony took her free hand in his again. “When you’re you again, I get you back. You’re not running off with that fancy art dealer.”

Gigi made no reply. What would her life be like, going forward? The doctors prescribed work, away from her family. Gigi had never been on her own. Would she be bored? Lonely?

“I’d be angry but I cheat, too,” Tony admitted. “It’s either sex or booze and booze wasn’t working for me.”

Gigi nodded and freed her hand, so she could wipe away a fresh tear.

“The times I’ve wanted to kill myself,” he leaned in again, and dropped his voice, “always in the car, driving.” He shook his head. “It’s a terrible feeling.”

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“Turn.” Gigi was on her hands and knees, pinning the hem of a bride’s dress. “And again.”

At this level, Gigi had a unique vantage: she saw the bride’s bony ankles, the weave of a summer purse. No one spoke to Gigi; she was a faceless worker with mismatched limbs. She was no one’s wife, no one’s mother.

The bride chatted with her mother. “With all the turmoil, Tom thinks we should elope.”

“Nonsense,” her mother replied. “We need a reason to celebrate.”

“First Dr. King. Now Robert Kennedy?” The bride fluttered her hands. “A boy was clubbed by the police, on Broadway, right beside me!” She brushed at her arms. “His blood was all over.”

“Oh, Barbara! You’re safe now.”

Gigi sat back on her heels, examining the hem. “Turn again.”

“Ask the pin girl where she got her dress.”

The bride looked down at Gigi, and spoke quietly. “Why doesn’t she ask you herself?”

With a sweep of her hand, Gigi indicated her own oversized earrings, her tanned skin, her place on the floor. “Tell her I made it.”

“It’s her creation.”

“Perfect for summer. But you’d need to be slender.”

“Tell her it fits any figure, it’s a cotton knit.” Gigi worked again on the hem.

“Ask her if she’ll make me one.”

The bride looked down at Gigi, who nodded.

“Ask what she charges.”

Madame Varga, who owned the shop, interrupted. “Mrs. George, allow me to take your order. Gigi’s dresses are flying out the door.”

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Gigi locked up for the night. She’d stayed late to cut the dress for Mrs. George; she’d rise early to stitch it together. It was the twentieth dress she’d sold, at \$7.95. The matching scarf sold for \$2.95. Madam Varga charged \$2 per dress to use the workroom and machines. Gigi used five yards per dress, at 59 cents per yard, and made the scarves from scraps. Gigi had net \$99 in the two months she’d been working at the shop, on top of her weekly salary. The unexpected income allowed her a few luxuries: dinner out with Jill and Winnie, a tube of French sun lotion.

Gigi made her way down the town’s main street. She passed the bike shop, the butcher store, one of two hair salons, a “hippy” boutique. All were closed at this hour. Open: Big Al’s diner, the tavern grill, the movie theater and its lit marquee featuring *The Odd Couple*.

The town was eight miles from Tony and the children, their schools and activities. Her doctors had been right: if Gigi returned there, she would be shunned. At church, too. Because she’d attempted suicide, Father Brennan forbade her from receiving communion. Father knew about the adultery but if he enforced that he’d have no parishioners. They’d shared a laugh, even though Gigi was hurt: expelled from the Church! Too, her eldest daughter Meg — via Tony — had asked Gigi to skip the spring ceremonies, the graduations, a confirmation, recitals. All her children were teased, Tony explained. ““Your mother is crazy, your sister is dead.””

Gigi's life was thus constrained. She became the pretty French woman who worked in the bridal shop and lived above it.

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Gigi handed each woman a note card. "I need your name, phone number, dress size, and \$7.95 in advance, thank you." Gigi glanced back at the shop, where Madame Varga was doing Gigi's job fitting a bride's dress. She turned back to the waiting women and pointed to the matching scarf that held back her hair. "This can be worn any number of ways: It's \$2.95."

A woman handed Gigi \$33 and the completed card. "They're just the cutest! I ordered three of each. How soon can I expect them?"

"Next week." Gigi reached into her apron for change.

"You must have elves working round the clock."

Gigi smiled. "Seamstresses in the Bronx."

Older women, teen age girls, new mothers: everyone wanted a "Gigi", as they'd come to be known. They wore colorful wrap and halter dresses in a cotton jersey that looked good on most every figure. Gigi moved along the line, accepting compliments and orders, squelching her pride: she'd needed something comfortable to work in and had made a few dresses and scarves for herself in cheerful prints. From that simple want she'd created a fashion line.

A woman handed her cash and a card. "I recognize you. From Scarsdale."

Gigi nodded.

"Wicked, leaving your children."

Gigi steadied herself. "They visit." She held the cash and card in her hand. Should she refuse it? She turned away and moved down the line, reminding herself that volume lowered costs.

"Gigi?"

She brightened. "Jill! Winnie! Why are you standing in line?"

"We didn't want to cut." Both wore "Gigi" dresses. Jill was in a zebra patterned wrap dress, Winnie in a flower power halter. "We're going to D.C. on Wednesday to march, for the Poor People's Campaign. Will you come with us?"

Gigi took a moment to think. "Midweek is slow. Let me ask."

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Gigi sat on the wood steps of her back porch, entering orders into her book. Beside her were four bolts of fabric, an overnight bag, her purse. The grumble of Peter's Firebird sedan announced his arrival. Gigi looked up and smiled, motioned for him to join her. It was still light out, a summer evening to bottle: no humidity, the perfume of lilacs, the buzz of cicadas.

He sat beside her and glanced at her book. "Look at those filled rows."

"Can we stop at the seamstress? If I drop this tonight I can get ahead of these orders. I fell behind going to the march."

Peter leaned over and kissed her cheek. "After that, I want to take you to a happening."

Gigi stopped writing. "The last time I went to one of those I jumped off a roof."

Peter rested his hand on her bare knee. “I think you’ll like this. It’s at a building I recently purchased. It’s more a ‘thing,’ than a ‘happening.’”

“What’s the difference?”

“This is more intimate.”

Gigi was wary. “It’s not one of those sex ‘things’”.

Peter scoffed. “That’s not my bag.”

Gigi closed her book. “I’ve been thinking about mine — about my place in the world.”

Peter lit a cigarette and handed it to her.

“My parents didn’t want me to work, they wanted me to be a wife.” She took a drag, tapped the ashes. “I was nineteen when I married Tony. He was twenty-one, he’d just graduated from college. I was supposed to keep house and make babies. I did that, ’til Kitty...” With her free hand she patted her book of orders. “But this — I’m good at this.”

From his pants, Peter extracted a pocket knife with an onyx handle. He clicked a tab, letting loose a small blade. He used it to carve the year in Roman numerals in the wood. He reached for the cigarette, and kept working. “An empire begins.”

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“Lose your left arm, your left arm your left arm,” the shaman instructed. “Lose your left leg your left leg...”

Gigi lay on the cool wood floor with her head resting on a bolster. Her outstretched outstretched arms — the left growing light — touched Peter’s at the tip of her middle finger. She

didn't know the person to her right whose finger touched hers, lightly. It was a linked line of twelve encircling the shaman. "Let your head go..."

Gigi felt her body rise from the floor. Was it the shaman's voice, or the potion they'd drunk upon arriving, which tasted like the forest.

"Let the door open."

Gigi felt herself float away, into a brightly lit dimension. "Hello, Kitty."

"Hello, Mamma."

"You're not alone."

"I'm in their arms."

"My parents."

"You have to wait."

Gigi opened her eyes but didn't see. Now she was in bright sunshine, the scent of her French sun lotion in the air. Waves crashed, children laughed, someone said something about Jayne and her sisters and a yacht.

She blinked but this time went nowhere, she was earth-bound. She heard a truck rumbling over the cobbled street, a car's radio blasting Janis Joplin, someone yelling, 'Nico!'"

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At the restaurant, Gigi sipped her martini. Was it wise to drink? She still felt woozy from the potion. Or the ceremony. "Did you go beyond?"

Peter studied the menu. "I did."



“Me, too.”

He put down the menu and picked up his own martini, clinking it to Gigi’s. “I saw my wife. This time she was in the water.”

“Where was she before?”

“On the dock.”

“I couldn’t tell where I was,” Gigi recalled. “It was as though a seam opened.”

The waiter took their order: steak tartare, soft shell crab.

Gigi continued. “It was Kitty and it wasn’t. She was calm, clear — adult in her manner.”

“Edie doesn’t age. She’s in the water, in the same cute suit from our last trip to the Catskills.”

Gigi buttered a piece of bread and took a bite. She chewed, swallowed. “And then I found myself seated in a beach chair, putting lotion on two small boys. They looked just like Kitty, as though she’d doubled.”

Peter smiled and sipped his martini.

“Beside me was a young man with a scar that ran from his ear to his chest.”

“The boys’ father?”

Gigi slowly shook her head, puzzled by what she’d seen. “The boys wanted Jayne to come in the water. But she was on a boat with a prince.” She turned to Petter. “Kooky, huh?”

“Are you glad we went to the happening?”

Gigi nodded. “I saw a future.”

Peter finished his drink, and motioned for another. “Edie beckoned me.”

“Into the water?”

“You know I can’t swim.”

Gigi leaned in and kissed him. “I’ll teach you.”

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The first ferry of the morning deposited them on the island. Peter set their bags and groceries in a faded red wagon and pulled it along the boarded walks to his beach house. Here was a sea and sand paradise sixty miles from the city. There were no cars. It was mostly quiet, save for the murmur of waves and laughter from open-air restaurants. Another pleasure: no one knew Gigi’s situation. They knew she was French and worked in fashion, that she mixed a tart Whiskey Sour, that she was teaching Peter to swim. At the beach she was known for her floppy straw hat and Audrey Hepburn sunglasses. They did not know but wouldn’t be bothered that in the privacy of Peter’s deck, Gigi sunbathed topless. That she rose with the sun to say the rosary, weep, and commune with Kitty.

Gigi slipped into her cover up, pleased that her once-withered limbs had filled out. She looked like herself again. “Ready for your lesson?”

“I’d rather float with you.” Peter brought her into his embrace.

“You can’t surf if you can’t swim,” Gigi reminded him, and wriggled free. She walked to the window to check the conditions, then turned back to him. “The water is calm. We’ll practice breathing.”

Peter looked at her fondly.

“What?”

“You’re a natural. A mother. Calm, clear, encouraging.”

Gigi nodded. “I miss that. I miss them.” She slipped her sun lotion into the beach bag.

“The evening report.”

They descended the outdoor stairway and stepped on to the sand. From a neighboring house they could hear on its radio the last lines of “The Star Spangled Banner,” the announcer’s “Play ball!”

“What do the children do during the summer?”

“Swim team, tennis lessons, Nok hockey, ping pong? Baseball for Jamie.” Gigi spread their blanket. “He’s a switch-hitting pitcher.” She sat. “I’m not sure what that means but he seemed pleased. And Jayne won the school spelling bee.” She missed Tony, too, but didn’t know how they’d reunite.

Peter sat beside Gigi and shed his madras shirt, folding it neatly. Together they watched a young couple walk by, she wearing an itty bitty bikini, he in Hawaiian pattern trunks. Up the beach a small crowd was gathered around a guitar player and the remnants of a fire; they looked to have been out all night.

“Was Kitty like the rest of them?”

“She was,” Gigi said evenly. “Golden curls, like my son’s. A laugh she couldn’t stop once she started.” Gigi raised her arms. “Always pouncing, from bed to bed, from the banister to the couch. That’s how she got her nickname. Her given name is Mary.” Gigi lowered her hands.

“When she’d exhausted herself I’d find her in front of the television, sitting in a split or lying flat on her stomach with her legs stretched out. She was in motion even when she was still.”

Peter turned his attention to the water. He took a deep breath, set his hand on his heart.

“Do you think I’ll ever be comfortable in it?”

“When you learn to breathe.”

He turned to Gigi. “What are you afraid of?”

“Poverty.”

Peter nodded. “Soviet aggression.”

“A pandemic.” She mimicked washing her hands.

“Nuclear annihilation.”

Gigi held his gaze. “Another world war.”

“The dark.”

Gigi tilted her head, thinking about that. “It’s morning I dread. I wake up to the same reality: my Kitty is gone.”

Peter leaned back and lay flat on his back, shielding his eyes from the sun. “Clowns.”

Gigi laughed, then shivered. “Snakes.”

Peter rolled on to his side and ran his hand the length of Gigi’s thigh. “Losing you.”

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Gigi stood at the office door. “I’ve vacuumed the showroom and swept the workshop.”

Madame Varga added figures on a machine. “We had quite a week.”

Gigi bit back her smile.

Madame Varga looked up from her work. An immigrant from Hungary, she had a dark elegance, with stiff hair, penciled eyebrows, Elizabeth Arden red lips. “We’ll have to formalize this arrangement.” She motioned. “Sit.”

Gigi did, feeling the sweet relief of being off her feet after a long day filling orders and fitting brides.

Madame Varga continued. “We can get the shop next door and create a passage between the two. There’s workspace in the rear, as there is here. You’ll have to hire a seamstress — or three — and a sales girl. I’ve spoken to my brother, who is my partner here. He’s impressed with your French pedigree, with the work you did for M. Roget. That said, he is a formal person and has some reservations about your character.”

Gigi folded her hands in a kind of prayer.

“You have a curious life,” Madame Varga explained. “You wear a wedding band, yet a man who is not your husband picks you up at eight in the evening Saturday and returns you Monday morning smelling of the beach. You live in a bedsit over a workshop yet a chauffeur delivers your children when they visit.”

“They live with their grandparents.”

“They’re very disruptive,” Madame said sternly, then broke into a smile. “Trying on tiaras, stomping around in our shoes.”

“They’re full of beans.”

Madame handed Gigi a check for her week’s pay. “In spite of that, you have a talent I can’t ignore. We’d be foolish to miss out on this venture.”

“At the same terms?” Gigi asked.

“The risk is ours: we’ll start with a 65 percent share and revisit the agreement in five years.”

Gigi nodded.

“I’ll have my lawyer draw up the papers.”

“Thank you.” Gigi rose to leave.

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Gigi closed the shop door. She lingered, admiring the window display she’d created: a mini, a beaded daisy lace, a long sleeveless sheath. She’d done good work for Madame Varga. Now Gigi would have a shop of her own.

She walked on, towards the diner, even though she didn’t need a coffee black or a slice of pie. She passed the five and dime still with its Fourth of July bunting, the hardware store and its pyramid of paints. Gigi had grown comfortable in this town: all her needs could be met on foot. She had her grief circle at the Episcopal Church and a hair salon where the girl — Sheila, from Derry — had learned to style Gigi’s hair just so.

Gigi reached the diner’s pay phone and inserted a dime. She dialed, then listened to the ring. “Tony?”

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With Tony's investment, Gigi negotiated more favorable terms and opened her first dress shop beside Madame Varga's. There she designed a boutique with zig-zag wallpaper, orange bucket chairs, a starburst clock. Gigi hired a sales girl and two seamstresses.

Gigi was proud of herself in a way she'd never been. She'd created a brand. She sat for interviews with local, national, even international press. She was healthy in mind and body. The one thing she couldn't square was her relationship with Peter. He would have liked to invest in Gigi, and he thought she should set her design studio in Manhattan.

Outside, Gigi felt the cool that came with evening. She pulled closed and locked the shop's door. It was a long holiday weekend. This would be her first break since opening. She slid into the passenger seat and leaned in for a kiss. "Could we make a stop?"

Peter shifted into gear. "Where to?"

Gigi tied one of her colorful scarves around her head to protect her hair from the wind. "I'll direct you."

The evening was cool and dry. Fireflies lit the dark lawns of the suburban split-levels they passed. On the radio, there was news of the clash between students and police in Chicago, outside the Democratic Convention. Peter switched the station to sports, where the announcers discussed Billie Jean King's chances in the U.S. Open. At a stop light, Peter reached across the console, taking Gigi's hand in his. They shared a smile. It had been a month since they'd seen each other.

Gigi breathed in, satisfied. She knew where she was going. "Take this road, here."

Peter pulled into the cemetery entrance and slowed his speed. "It's not closed at night?"

“It’s always open,” Gigi assured him and pointed. “Follow the drive.” She craned, looking for the low lying pond and its weeping willows. “It’s designed like a park.” She counted silently to herself: one oh three, one oh five one oh... “Stop here.”

Gigi opened the car door and stepped out, straightening her dress, loosening her head scarf. From her purse she took her rosary, then extended her other hand to Peter. “Come. It won’t take long.”

Peter followed Gigi up a slight hill, her chunk-heeled sandals sinking in the rain-softened sod. They passed a huge stone Jesus, which marked the Fitzgerald graves. The Mulloys, then a line of Fracks. Gigi stopped at a Frack grave and lay a hand on its rough stone. “My friend from grief circle. Her husband and then her son, in the War.” Gigi blessed herself and continued on, past the Warrens, and the Burroughs, to the Bourne plots. With a sweep of her arm, she indicated their many stones. “They were the first wave of Irish.”

Gigi moved easily right, then forward, right again, then stopped. “This is Kitty’s.” She pointed to the names at the top of the stone. “She’s buried with Tony’s grandparents.”

She knelt, and with her fingers, pulled back the overgrown grass obscuring the girl’s engraved name and the dates of her short life. Pleased, Gigi sat back on her heels. “There she is.”

Peter set his hand on her shoulder. “It’s so peaceful here.” He lit a cigarette and stepped away, standing among the Burroughs. “I’ll give you a moment to yourself.”

“Thank you.” Holding her rosary, Gigi brought her hands together in prayer, but didn’t pray. She listened to the chatter of robins, felt the damp cool of grass on her shins. A peaceful place, yes, but she would never be at peace with her loss. Gigi lay her hand on the cold stone,



then let it drop to its base. With her finger, she traced the letters back and forth, back and forth:

M A R Y - Y R A M - M A R Y - Y R A M - M A R Y - Y R A M - M A R Y.