

In Absentia

The woman pauses almost imperceptibly at the top of the steps, as though hesitant about joining the throng of Tuesday morning commuters flowing through Grand Central Station. The decision made, she tip-toes down the shiny marble steps with fleet footing, nimbly navigating a path through the river of bodies, each intent on taking its own direct path without paying heed to the other travelers.

At the bottom of the steps, the dense stream of determined New Yorkers fans out in the main concourse, and the crowding reduces to a more tolerable level. The woman looks around. Amongst the slow but steadily moving workers, stationary bodies stand out: rail employees, a couple of station cops, arms folded, eyeing the commute while discussing last night's game, the old vets, insane or just confused, their tattered cardboard signs pleading for kindness or generosity from the commute-hardened passengers. The woman's eyes alight on the ticket booth and she walks purposefully toward it.

There is a line at the booth and the woman puts down her cases. One is a slim attaché case, made from shiny black leather, with gold trimmings where the handle joins the body, and two straps passing through gold buckles on either side. The initials CMH are embossed discreetly, in gold, in one corner. The other case is a small suitcase. It's larger than an overnight case, but not designed for accommodating a long stay away from home. In contrast to the plain business-like attaché, the main panels have an abstract flowery design in muted pastels, with light brown leather around the sides.

Reaching the front of the line, the woman asks for a round-trip ticket to Albany. She takes directions to her platform from the jowly, blue-shirted ticket clerk, straining to understand his mumbled tones over the crackly loudspeaker that allows him to speak through the bullet-proofed glass. She picks up her cases and continues briskly on her way.

I sometimes wonder if my first kiss would have been quite so memorable if it hadn't been immediately followed by my learning about the first tragedy of my young life. I was ten, and so was Jamie Fishburne. It was lunchtime recess on the last day of school, with the prospect of weeks of sun, fun and family outings ahead of me. I liked Jamie. He was a quiet, shy boy, and never pulled my hair or called me horrid names like some of the others. He liked me too. In fact, he went further, and told me he loved me. In the face of being called a sissy and a pansy by his friends for using the L-word, this was an act of unparalleled devotion. Feeling flattered, as we sat leaning against the school building, our behinds getting dirty on the grimy schoolyard, I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his. Not for too long, maybe half a second, but it was a kiss nevertheless. Jamie smiled shyly, but I could tell he wanted to wipe his lips on his shirt cuff. It was all a bit risky, kissing girls in the playground, especially with his buddies lurking.

I looked at my sneakers and banged my toes together to pass the time, waiting for Jamie to decide if he was going to reciprocate. In my peripheral vision I detected the striding, purposeful gait of Miss Walton, the principal. She was walking toward Jamie and me, her knee-length plaid skirt looming over us. My first thought was that she must have seen me kiss Jamie and was going to tell us off, but shielding my eyes against the sun and looking up at her almost silhouetted face, I didn't see a scolding look, but one of sorrow or pity.

"Cynthia," she said, still sounding like the stern principal she was, but trying to inject a note of sympathy, "you must come with me. Your mommy's here."

She reached down for my hand and helped me up, keeping my sweaty little hand in her giant grasp as we walked toward the entrance to the school building. Brushing bits of gravel from the backs of my legs, I turned and glanced at Jamie. He shrugged, gave a half-hearted wave, stood up and half-ran, half-skipped over to where the rest of his gang was playing.

My mother sat with her back to me on one of the stiff-backed wooden seats in the school office. On her lap was Timmy, my three-year-old brother, and standing by the chair, holding on to mommy's hand was Lucy, my sister who had turned six in the spring. I didn't like the office. It had the smell of discipline and grown-up seriousness, not like the classroom with its soft chalky atmosphere and brightly colored designs around the walls: pictures cut out from magazines and pasted to stiff card with liberal (some might even say wasteful) amounts of amber-colored glue.

"I'll leave you alone, Mrs. Hamilton," said Miss Walton, already backing out of the room, her hand never having left the door handle. "Please just ask Rachel if you need any help." Rachel worked in the school office.

On hearing Miss Walton's voice, mommy spun head round and her eyes found mine. She looked upset, as though she'd been crying. Her normally well-brushed straight brown hair looked matted and slightly disheveled. She stood, lowering Timmy gently down, and told Lucy to look after her brother. She rushed over to me and knelt down, and hugged me, almost squeezing the breath from me. I heard the tactful click of the latch as Mrs. Walton closed the door on us.

"Oh my baby," mommy was saying, "oh my sweet baby." She rocked me back and forth. Her emotion was upsetting me, even though I didn't know what it was all about.

"Come on," she said, trying to smile. "You can come home early today."

I wanted to ask her what was wrong, but seemed to be struck dumb. I knew that whatever it was, it was going to be very unpleasant, and believed in a childish way that if I could put off finding out what had brought mommy here in this upset state, then maybe it would go away and everything would be all right.

As we left the school building I thought I heard Miss Walton whisper to Rachel, "The poor woman." Somehow mother got us all home. I sat in the front of the family station wagon and the two young ones were strapped in the back. Occasionally I glanced up at mommy and saw her bite her lip, and blink as tear away as it started to form on the lower rim of her misty eye. If she noticed me looking she would turn and compose her face into

a smiling mask that couldn't hide what she was really feeling.

At home, Uncle Frank and Auntie Flo were waiting for us. Uncle Frank was mommy's brother, a large rotund man who sweated freely in the sultry North Eastern summer months. Auntie Flo was daddy's sister. She was small and delicate looking, but in fact possessed a wiry strength that complemented her solid unmarried independence. At the time they were all ageless to me, just members of that collection of people who weren't children: the grown-ups. Doing the calculations now, I know that Frank was 45, five years older than mommy, and Flo would have been 42.

Frank and Flo put on a great show of being delighted to see us. Their cheeriness was a transparent charade even to my young eyes, and increased my sense of foreboding still more. In the living room of our large, white ranch-style home, earnest, whispered conversation ensued amongst the adults. I sat on the sofa trying to stop Timmy from wandering off and bumping into the furniture, and tried to quell Lucy's fearful questioning. The solemn atmosphere had even encroached on Lucy's bright and playful nature now, and she was asking me what was the matter with mommy.

The adults seemed to reach a resolution and Uncle Frank shuffled out of the room. Auntie Flo picked up little Timmy and said "Come on Timmy, let's go and play in the yard," her eyes almost imploring in their sorrow as they glanced back at Lucy and me. Mommy came and sat between us on the sofa. She held my left hand and Lucy's right, and spoke very softly.

"Something bad has happened, and I want you both to be brave girls for me when I tell you what it is."

Lucy nodded, though I don't think she really knew what mommy was saying. I squeezed mom's hand tight, wanting to know what it was, but dreading the truth.

"Something happened to daddy on his way to work this morning. He's.... he won't be coming back anymore."

I understood immediately that he was dead. The details came from yellowing newspaper cuttings I found as an adult. It was a car crash. Mommy told me that much. A student who had spent the night partying after he got the grades he needed was still drunk on his way home early the next morning. He'd run the stoplight at the entrance to the campus and hit dad's VW Bug side-on. The small car didn't offer any resistance against the student's heavy automobile. Dad died because his thorax was crushed and blood filled his lungs. The student wasn't wearing his seat belt (it wasn't the law in 1968) and died from blood loss caused by the cuts he received from the broken windshield.

My mind was numbed by what mommy had told us, and at the same time it was overwhelmed by the brittle blue realization of what it meant. No more daddy. No more big friendly giant to sweep me up in his arms in the evening and tickle my face with his bushy beard. No more magical games that transported me to faraway places and without my knowing it made fertile the soil of my young imagination, no more mind boggling puzzles that subtly nurtured my logical side. No more safe place to hide when mommy was away visiting with friends or relations and I'd read a sad story about an injured

animal and needed a cuddle.

Lucy looked upset and confused. “Where’s daddy gone, mommy?”

“To another place darling. Like another country. But it’s a very long way away, and he can’t come back to see us.”

“Has he gone to heaven?”

Mommy sighed. “Yes darling, that’s where he’s gone.”

I don’t think she wanted to say that. We were a fairly secular family and talk of heaven and hell didn’t figure in the explanation of life’s mysteries. But in the end, it was the best way she could tell a six-year-old that her father had died but that it was going to be all right.

Lucy said “Oh,” and was quiet after that.

I wanted to be brave and grown-up, but the invisible giant’s fist that squeezed my chest was forcing the emotion up to my throat, and I had to release it before it choked me. I buried my head in mommy’s bosom and sobbed. That started Lucy off, and mom followed. The three of us cried and cried, hugging and holding, awash in a sea of grief. I still don’t know how much Lucy really understood, and how much she was infected by the sorrow coming from mom and me. Certainly she recovered first and moved slightly away from us, and after a while pulled a doll out from behind a sofa cushion and started to talk in whispers to it.

Mom’s sobbing subsided and she rocked me gently as the well of my tears dried and my sobs became moist sniffles. I hugged her tight, not wanting ever to let her go.

Auntie Flo re-emerged; Frank must have been looking after Timmy. She held a box of tissues and wiped my face with one of them.

“Are you going to be a brave girl for your mommy?” she asked. I nodded and Flo smiled encouragingly.

I realize now how brave *she* was being. Her twin brother had been taken away so suddenly, yet in all the time I saw her, she never lost her composure. I marvel at mommy’s strength too now. She must have insisted that she pick us up from school on her own, and tell us what had happened gently but truthfully, without confusing us by wrapping it up in some kind of mysticism – or only enough of it to placate Lucy.

Auntie Flo gave mommy a tissue too, and took her other hand. The two women seemed to draw strength from each other. Each felt the loss in her own way, and the other could empathize and at the same time forget some of her own pain by reaching out with a soothing hand.

It was different with Uncle Frank. Even I could tell that he and daddy hadn’t gotten along well. He didn’t come to visit very often, even though he lived closer than Auntie Flo. One of the few times I’d heard my parents arguing, it seemed to be over Frank. I was in bed one evening, reading by the yellow glow of my Donald Duck lamp, and I heard voices downstairs. It seemed louder, more harsh than the usual muffled murmurs of grown-up

talk that added to the sea of sounds that lulled me to sleep.

I crept to the bedroom door, being careful not to wake Lucy, and held it slightly ajar so I could hear better. The voices were still quite indistinct, and I was frightened of being caught spying, so I didn't go any further. I strained to hear:

“...don't want him round here...”

“...that was all so long ago...”

“... still don't trust him...”

“...you've never taken the time to get to know Frank properly...”

Eventually they stopped and their voices returned to normal. I don't remember picking up any animosity between them at breakfast the next morning, so the argument must have been resolved somehow.

The funeral was upsetting. Mommy took me aside and asked me calmly if I wanted to go to say good-bye to daddy for the last time. I appreciate now how much they tried to treat me with the kindness and protection that a child needs, but at the same time be open and honest with me. Maybe having lived through the 50s and 60s, their generation had been lied to by authority figures so often that they were determined that the approaching 70s would be more honest, and started it at home. I told her I would like to go to the funeral, not knowing if I did or not. A kind neighbor who wasn't a close enough friend to attend the funeral looked after Timmy and Lucy.

There were a lot of strange adults at the service whom I couldn't remember seeing before. They all seemed to know me, which was even more unsettling. Most of daddy's family lived in the West now and we didn't see them often. His two brothers and their wives and oldest children, and his mother, who was 74 and very frail, all flew out from California. My Auntie Susan, daddy's younger sister, lived in Tacoma and she came alone, leaving her husband to look after the two children.

In the church (strength of tradition and my paternal grandmother's insistence dictating the religious nature of the service), daddy's casket was left open before the cremation so people could pay their last respects. I walked up with mommy, hand in hand. Daddy's face was very close to my head. It looked like him, but I couldn't believe it was him. He still had his beard and curly hair, and I could see his red lips through the whiskers. Even the pores on his slightly bulbous nose were there. His eyes were closed and his forehead wore a frown, as though he was in a slightly troubled sleep. But he was so still, his lifelessness contrasting too much with the vivacity that captured his spirit in my mind. I squeezed mom's hand and walked back to the pew, giving her the chance to have a final silent communion with daddy.

Auntie Flo put her arm around me when I sat on the church bench, and Uncle Frank patted me on the thigh, squeezing it slightly before lifting his hand.

After the service people came back to our house. There was a lot of food, which mom and Auntie Flo had prepared. I felt bored and neglected. Mommy had to talk to all the friends and relatives who had come a long way to be there. There was a lot of grown-up talk and

it made me feel uneasy, as though I'd suddenly become very unimportant. There were a couple of older cousins, children of my West Coast uncles. They tried to engage me in conversation but they seemed embarrassed to talk to me and I wasn't really feeling very talkative so eventually they drifted off. I was pleased when people started to go home, the local friends and colleagues from the university first, then the people who had come from further afield.

By 6 PM everyone had left except for Auntie Flo, who was staying the night, and the house seemed like home again. Our neighbors brought the young ones back, and I got Timmy ready for bed. The feeling of uselessness faded, and once more I began to feel as though I was the proper person that mommy and daddy always treated me as, and not the insignificant child I was earlier, worthy of pity and nothing more.

I recognize that evening as the end of one phase of my life and the start of a new one. My childhood was no longer the safe, cosseted one of the two-parent family. I wouldn't want for love and affection; mommy gave us an abundance of that. Sometimes I even felt guilty that she seemed to lavish more attention on me than Lucy or little Timmy, but I think now that she was compensating for the fact that I took daddy's death harder than them because I understood it better. Affection alone, though, can't protect a child from all the evil that hides, awaiting its moment. Without my father, our family's future would be a more vulnerable one, exposed to the malevolence that is as much a part of the fabric of life as a mother's love.

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The woman sits facing the engine of the decelerating train. She has removed her thick black coat and sits still and erect in the light blue vinyl seat. Her expensive clothes reveal her to be no stranger to Fifth Avenue. The navy blue jacket covers a beige silk blouse that is fastened with small, pearl buttons. The skirt matches the top and is tight, but not provocatively so. It covers the woman's legs to just below her knees. The stockinged legs end with elegant black high-heeled shoes. Simple jewelry complements the suit: a turquoise broach, a silver chain around the neck from which hangs an oval silver locket, and a thin gold bracelet around the right wrist. The woman does not wear a wedding ring.

As she gazes out of the window onto an industrial suburb, the train driver's voice announces "Ossining, next station Ossining." Only 20 miles out of Manhattan and already it looks like a different country. The woman stares at a huge pyramidal mound of tires rising amongst the piles of crushed, rusty car bodies that litter a breaker's yard. The purpose of the tires is unclear. Possibly it's a sarcophagus for immortalizing dead cars, buried deep within its interior.

At Ossining a large black woman, laden down with shopping and several small children sits opposite her. The black lady smiles warmly, and the woman smiles back, but avoids eye contact. Instead her eyes focus on the children, as though she wishes they would keep

still so she could count them. As the train begins to move again, the woman in blue reaches into her attaché case and pulls out some sheaves of paper. The one on top has the title “Murphy vs. Murphy (née Johnson)”. The woman sighs almost inaudibly, turns the page and starts to read.

The summer was long, hot, and pointless. The still, midge infested waters of Lake Cayuga reflected the vivid greens and browns of the rich foliage that lined the shore. Blue skies seemed to stretch for infinity, broken only by the occasional vapor trail of a jetliner, heading west. All of this, though, all of the rich splendor of nature, the slow idle days of summer break, were sucked into the endless vacuum created by daddy’s absence.

For the first couple of weeks after the funeral, the house was busy with visitors. Auntie Flo, of course, and Uncle Frank were on hand. The West coast relatives stayed around for while, but had their own lives to continue; a couple of dad’s colleagues from the university dropped by on the weekends, trying to make it seem like a casual visit, but revealing their slight discomfort through awkward silences or forced attempts at jollity.

Before long, the visits dwindled and we were left more or less alone again. I think mom understood. People are very good at responding to crises in the short term by rallying round and giving support, but eventually that disruption threatens the stability of their own lives, and there’s a natural tendency to retreat into the old, safe, pre-disaster routine.

Of my parents’ friends, Peter and Joanne Davies remained closest, and kept a vigilant eye on us. Peter was an old colleague of dad’s. They’d gotten their associate professorships at around the same time, in different branches of the Psychology Department, and had moved up through the academic ranks together. Joanne worked at the university too, lecturing at the Law School. Although they were only slightly younger than my parents, they were childless. I think it was a combination of career-mindedness and a slight medical problem that prevented them from having babies. I’d always called them Uncle Pete and Auntie Jo.

Auntie Flo actually moved in with us for a while. She spent a lot of time with mommy, talking to her in low, gentle tones. I think she would have spent even more time with us if she hadn’t had her business to run. Flo managed a small catering business. Well, it was more of a coffee and sandwich shop, really, a favorite day-time place with the Cornell crowd, where the students could linger over a single espresso all afternoon and have earnest conversations about Hemmingway. She’d started to cater for small functions too, most of the business coming from the university departments. Although undergraduate classes had wound down for the summer now, the coffee shop stayed busy and there were enough seminars and conferences to assure Flo of a steady trade.

It seemed natural, then, that mom should start to help out. It kept her occupied during the long summer days when her mind might otherwise get trapped in a dark alley of grief, and she could work mostly at home and keep an eye on us children. In turn, I assumed some

of the responsibility for Lucy and Timmy, making sure they didn't get under mommy's feet too much, washing Timmy and Lucy at bed time, reading to them before they went to sleep.

Lucy seemed remarkably unaffected by daddy's absence. She asked about him often, wondering where he was and what he was doing, but I didn't see her cry again, except on the rare occasions when mom was feeling exhausted from sleeplessness and would tire of Lucy's questions and snap at her. Mom would immediately repent and embrace Lucy, whispering gently, apologetically until she stopped crying. Overall though, I think Lucy was blessed with an inner optimism that, even at that tender age, helped her cope with life's misfortunes. She was also favored with a pretty, smiling face, framed by wispy blonde hair, which endeared her to strangers and those close to her alike.

Timmy was too young to understand. He missed daddy coming home and lifting him high over his head, pretending to drop him, causing Timmy to squeal with delight. He knew that daddy was no longer there to climb over when he was lying on the floor studying papers, always with the threat of suddenly rising up with a deep throaty roar like a monster from the deep to carry Timmy off to the kitchen, where he would deposit him on the kitchen table for mom or me to keep distracted for a while. Timmy missed this, but he couldn't have grasped the finality of what had happened, and I was glad about that.

The routine of mom preparing vegetables and mixing sandwich fillings and doing some baking during the day, and Flo coming over in the evening to keep us company was a settling one. It gave us back some semblance of normality. It wasn't a substitute for what had gone before, of course, and Flo would never have tried to replace her brother. However, the sudden turbulence that had dragged us from the serene lake of family life and shook us till we were dazed was gradually stilled.

A less welcome aspect of the new routine was Uncle Frank's presence. He stayed away during the week. He managed a travel agent shop in downtown Ithaca and seemed to work late on weekday evenings, but the shop closed weekends, so he often visited for a few hours. Sunday was his preferred day. He would come for lunch, and mom and Flo would feed him up. I didn't think he needed feeding at all; he seemed to have many weeks' of surplus food supply stored about his fleshy body. He had a massive appetite, and it would make me feel quite ill watching him shovel food into his overworked mouth. He was so keen to fill it that sometimes he would put another forkful in before he'd swallowed last one, and the overflow would cascade down his chin back on to the plate. He would close his eyes while eating and make grunting, animal-like noises as he chomped down on his food. Somehow he would manage to get gobs of food into the bushy sideburns that adorned his face and extended down to the middle of his flabby cheeks.

After a meal, I would be keen to help wash the dishes, because I dreaded the alternative. Sometimes I would be lucky, and help Flo while mom talked to Frank, but often mom and Flo would do the dishes, and Frank, having lowered his large frame into the complaining sofa, would grab me, saying something like "Come and give your favorite

uncle a hug.”

I knew everything was not as it should be, but felt powerless to do anything about it. Frank would sit me on his lap and superficially he would be asking me about what I’d done during the week (“Oh, the same as last week.”) and how mommy was (“She’s OK.”) His hands had their own agenda though. Nothing overtly sinister appeared to happen, but I could feel his puffy fingers resting on my skinny thigh, ever so slightly squeezing it or rubbing my leg through the thin material of my skirt. He would stop talking and pretend to doze, and his breathing would change, becoming deep and rhythmic. I would feel frightened but powerless to move. Once, though, I felt a hard lump appear beneath me in the middle of Frank’s lap, and the sensation of that thing pressing into my bottom made me leap from him and run to my room.

This ritual continued through the late summer and fall, up until Thanksgiving. Mercifully, Frank couldn’t play his dirty little game every week. Sometimes he didn’t show up, to my intense relief; on some occasions I managed to help with the dishes, and on others Pete and Jo came for lunch, so even if Frank was there he could scarcely start to molest me in front of other people. I found it deeply upsetting though. When school started again in September I had trouble concentrating on my lessons. Sometimes, usually on a Monday after Frank had visited, or a Friday when I knew he was coming that weekend, I would burst into tears. My teacher was very understanding of course: the poor girl lost her father at the beginning of the summer; the family seems to be coping, but it’s no wonder the child finds coming back to school so upsetting. I would sit in the office with Rachel while I recovered. Rachel was kind and pretty and talked to me in a sympathetic way, and told me that my daddy loved me and wouldn’t want to see me this sad. And all the while I couldn’t tell anyone why I was really crying. I did miss daddy, of course, but now the grief over his death was almost replaced by a sense of anger at his betrayal. He’d left me alone, at the mercy of Uncle Frank, deserted me when I needed a knight in shining armor to save me from the evil monster.

Years of therapy haven’t really helped me understand why I didn’t cry for help. Children often don’t. The abusing adult has all the advantages. He can deny any accusations point-blank, ascribing them to childish imaginings or outright lies. He can act indignant and insulted and make a scene. The child rarely has any proof of what happened. And of course, the child is drowning in a sea of guilt. She knows that what’s happening is bad in some way, and the badness gets attached to her. Punishment is the usual consequence of naughtiness, so she keeps quiet to avoid punishment for her imagined wrongdoings.

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The woman drops the novel she has been reading on to her lap. It’s a Victorian romance, the lurid painted cover showing an open-shirted, flaxen-haired hero bending over a woman who looks ready to faint with the excitement of it all, her rounded bosom about to burst through the low top of her tight scarlet dress.

Out of the window the Hudson River is visible through the sparse foliage that borders the railroad tracks. It's not at its broadest here, but still nearly a mile wide. Mist floats down from the gently sloping banks and thin ghostly fingers swirl atop the surface of the river. Looking ahead, the woman sees the Catskills rising up beyond the river. The lower slopes are covered with thrusting pines. Higher up on the slopes leading to the peaks, the vegetation thins leaving only stark brown and gray rock faces. It's too early for snow.

The rhythmic sound of iron train wheels clattering over level track changes timbre as the train rushes through a station without stopping. A second later, the soundscape reverts to its previous tone as the station is left behind. The train was moving too fast to allow the women to read the signs at the station, but now she looks through the far window, away from the river, and sees a large warehouse bearing the legend "Hyde Park Paints and Cellulose". She glances at the small white face of her gold-braceleted watch. It says 10:45. She picks up the book, finds her page and continues to read.

Thanksgiving was a time of mixed emotions. It brought searing reminders of the loss we all felt for daddy. It also prepared us for another impending absence, and, for me, marked the end of my torment at the clammy hands of Uncle Frank.

In early November there had been talk of flying to Washington to spend Thanksgiving with Auntie Susan and Uncle Lester. As the time approached, however, I think mom became reluctant to leave the house in which she'd celebrated the last eight Thanksgivings. Being away from home wouldn't ease the hurt or diminish the keenness with which she would miss daddy. So instead of traveling, we had small family affair in Ithaca, just mommy and the children and, of course, Auntie Flo and Uncle Frank.

There was one extra guest, Flo's "friend" Rowland Shelbourne. Flo had finally started to see a man, just when everyone had her down for a lifetime of spinsterhood. Rowland was a visiting professor from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. They'd met at the coffee shop. Rowland had been given the wrong filling in his sandwich, then the wrong type of bread (Flo had been having trouble with a new boy, but hadn't had the heart to sack him). Rowland asked to see the manager, was immediately placated by Flo's calm, sincere tone, and asked her to join him for lunch. She broke her usual rule and accepted his offer. At least he could be assured of good service now the boss was dining with him!

They made an odd couple to look at. Flo was small at five three, though she told people she was five five. You couldn't describe her face as ugly, but neither would you call it beautiful. Her complexion was slightly marked, as though she'd had bad acne as a teenager, and the skin seemed tight on her face, making it slightly shiny. She never wore make-up. Her nose was slightly hooked, but that was only noticeable in profile. When she turned on her easy smile, though, she was transformed. Her fine lips parted to reveal even white teeth, and her brown eyes glinted with a mischievous light. In a world where

plastic-smooth complexions and sculpted cheekbones are the only acceptable norm, Flo was easily overlooked. Her inner light kept her warm and loving once she had accepted, in her early thirties, that she would stay, probably single, in the East with her small business and closest brother and his family, rather than following her parents and other siblings on their journey West.

Then she met Rowland. He was a tall man, older than her, in his late forties. Like her, he'd never married, being wedded to his anthropological research instead. He had a slight stoop from having to bend down to talk to most people. He regarded people through round, steel-rimmed glasses. No-one really knew what happened between them that day in the cafe, or why two people who had spent most of their adult lives shunning love affairs should suddenly decide that they had met the right person. The lunch date led to dinner dates and trips to the movies. By Thanksgiving they seemed to be seeing each other several times a week.

Flo invited Rowland over for a couple of Sunday dinners, and he was popular with the family. I thought he looked like a nutty professor, but a kindly one. I don't know if he relished the thought of being surrounded by three young children, but he seemed to cope very well. He did some tricks with coins for Lucy which made her face light up with joy, and he was even patient with little Timmy when he started kicking Rowland's shin for no apparent reason other than that it was there. Mommy still had a little contact with the university, so that gave them some common ground to build on. Only Frank seemed slightly belligerent toward Rowland. I don't know if the adults noticed. If they did I'm sure they put it down to Frank's male dominance (such as it was) being threatened, rather than what I knew: that Rowland's presence prevented him from taking advantage of Flo and mom's temporary absence after the meal.

The Thanksgiving dinner was splendid. Mom did most of the work, insisting that Flo was a guest and she had to look after Rowland. Frank just lay slug-like on the sofa as usual. The turkey was light, crisp and golden-skinned. When we came to give thanks, a poignancy descended on the gathering. Daddy would always give thanks for his beautiful wife and children. Rowland diffused the emotion by giving thanks for being invited into such a warm and loving household, and for meeting a wonderful woman at his time of life. Flo teased him, asking who the woman was. Frank glowered darkly at the end of the table.

After dessert, Flo stood and said "I have one more thing to give thanks for." She smiled down at Rowland, whose head was only just below hers although he'd remained seated. "Rowland has to go back to Albuquerque at the end of this semester, and he's asked me to go with him. To be his wife."

Mom put her hand to her mouth and said "Oh!" Tears welled up and before long both women were crying and hugging. Mom kept on saying how happy she was, in spite of the tears. Rowland looked bashful. Timmy decided there was too much attention being paid to things other than himself, and started to cry very loudly. Lucy was entertaining herself by mashing up the remnants of her pumpkin pie with her spoon. I looked at Frank. He looked at me, and leered. I understood immediately what he was thinking. Without Flo and Rowland around, it would be much easier to find opportunities to get me alone. He

might even have to baby-sit us if mommy ever had to go out for an evening. I met his gaze steadily, with all the hostility my young eyes could muster. The leer left his face, and he looked away before I did.

I hugged Auntie Flo and said “Will you come back to visit us?”

“Of course we will sweetheart. And mommy will bring you to see us in Albuquerque. Do you know where that is?”

I shook my head.

“It’s in New Mexico. There are great big rocks there, and desert plains, and wonderful brownish red buildings made from adobe, and old Spanish missions, and Indian reservations.”

Rowland coughed and said “Don’t romanticize it too much honey! There are other things there, like McDonald’s and cars and highways and high-rises. But we’d love to show it to you if you come to visit Cindy. Would you like that?”

I nodded, though I wasn’t too sure. It sounded like a strange, faraway place. I walked over to mom, who was scraping the leftovers on to a single plate and hugged her. Her eyes were still moist. “Are we going to be all right mommy?”

“Sure honey, everything will be just fine.”

I needed to escape from all the doubt and uncertainty, so I went up to the room I shared with Lucy. I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling. Its mottled *bas-relief* texture showed up in the oblique light of the cold, low November sun, forming miniature valleys and mountains before my eyes. It was restful just to follow contours and imagine tiny people living in the valleys up there.

My reverie was interrupted by the sound of heavy, plodding footsteps on the stairs. I knew whom they belonged to. I held my breath, and exhaled, relieved, when I heard the bathroom door open and close. Minutes later, I heard the flush of the toilet, and the sound of the lock on the bathroom door being released. Muffled footsteps came to a shuffling halt outside my door. There was a single knock, and without waiting for an answer, Uncle Frank was in my room. I quickly sat up on my bed and brought my knees up to my chest. “Hello Cynth,” he said, “I haven’t had a chance to give you a cuddle today.”

He sat on the bed, very close to me. I felt my body rise slightly as his lumbering mass squashed down on the mattress. I was transfixed by his beady eyes. Normally they were closed when he played his little games; now they were focused on me and they made him look mean and predatory. He placed his hand on my knee, which was trembling. The palm was moist, either from sweat or because he hadn’t dried his hands properly. The hand slid down to the crevice between my tight knees and forced them apart. I was terrified. I couldn’t have screamed if I’d tried. The dank hand insinuated itself further between my legs, touching the inside of my thigh, making prickly goose bumps cover my legs.

I saw daddy over Frank’s shoulder. He looked angry with Frank, and annoyed that he couldn’t come to my rescue. I was reminded of the night I overheard the argument he had

with mom about Frank. The image vanished, but daddy's anger, his strength, was channeled through me. I straightened my legs quickly and kicked Frank in the side of his thigh with the soles of my sneakers. I think he was more surprised than hurt.

"No!" I said. "No more. It isn't right. I don't want you to touch me anymore. I'll tell mommy. And Rowland."

The last threat was an inspiration. Frank immediately retreated and lumbered off the bed. He tried to bluff. "No you won't, because you like it. And I'll tell your mommy that, and then she won't love you anymore."

It was too late for those threats. I could see through Frank now. He was pathetic and the surge of righteousness I felt was more than a match for his attempts to appear menacing.

"No you won't," I said, "just leave me alone."

"God you little bitch. Just because you've got those little titties growing now, you think you can call all the shots, just like all those other cunts."

Frank's face was dripping with the sweat of anger and impotent frustration. White flecks of saliva appeared on his crimson lips. I was frightened again, but held my ground. I wanted to cry, but not while he was there. Eventually he stopped glowering at me, wiped his face with a yellowing handkerchief and lurched from the room.

To my surprise, I didn't cry. I felt victorious. A malfeasant oppression left my young shoulders. I knew that daddy would be proud of me. I also knew that Uncle Frank wouldn't trouble me anymore.

Life improved all round after Thanksgiving. Mommy took over the running of Flo's business. As Flo said, mom had practically been running it anyway over the previous couple of months, Flo having been distracted by her burgeoning love affair with Rowland. Mom wasn't sure if she wanted the responsibility at first, but Flo said she would rather hand it over to her than sell it, as long as she promised to keep a waitress job open for her in case she ever needed to come back. I could tell she didn't mean it though.

Christmas was a sad time. Flo couldn't stay to celebrate it with us. She said she was sorry to be leaving the area where she'd lived nearly all her life, but was excited about starting her new life with Rowland. She had lots of new friends and relations to meet. The farewell at the train station was very tearful. I thought mom and Flo would never stop hugging and kissing. Rowland looked down shyly at his shuffling feet, and gave mom and us kids a polite kiss when the train to take them to Syracuse finally arrived.

We spent Christmas with Uncle Pete and Auntie Jo, which pleased me because it meant that Uncle Frank wouldn't be around. His visits had tailed off dramatically after Thanksgiving, and I overheard him tell mom on one of the rare occasions he did come for lunch that he'd been very busy at travel agency and was taking work home at weekends. I mentally hugged myself, realizing I'd got rid of him for good.

The New Year was snowy. I played with Lucy, making sure she didn't slip on the ice and

hurt herself, and I kept her and Timmy away from the frozen pond. Mommy worked hard to continue the success that Flo had made of the coffee shop. She had some good staff and could take time off to be with us, so we didn't want for her time and affection. At night, above the gentle breath of Lucy's untroubled sleep, I could sometimes hear mom crying. She missed dad terribly, but managed to fill the hole during the day, when he wouldn't have been around much anyway. It was during the evenings as I sat doing my homework by the roaring imitation log fire that I knew the feelings of loneliness came to her. I would watch her out of the corner of my eye, just staring at the dancing flame.

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At Hudson the train waits for twenty minutes. The PA announces a late connecting train, and they have to wait for it to catch up. The passengers are invited to get off the train if they want to stretch their legs and visit the station's cafeteria.

The woman stays seated and looks at the bustle of activity on the platform. An electric cart pulls a train of three palates that carry parcels and bundles of newspapers. It stops outside her window and railway men start to unload the palates into the train's cargo bay. They don't take much care and throw the bundles with cheerful abandon.

A crackle from the loudspeaker presages another announcement. They will be departing in five minutes, so passengers for Albany should re-join the train. At the mention of Albany, the woman's attention leaves the cargo handlers and focuses on what the announcer is saying.

She has finished her thick trashy novel. It lies, spine broken, on the seat next to her. As the train pulls away for the last leg of the journey, it enters a dark tunnel. The woman looks at herself in the black mirror of the train window. The image is confused because the window has two panes and there are reflections from all four glass surfaces. But she can see her deep red painted lips against the pale foundation of her made-up face. The small even nostrils show up darker below the straight firm line of her nose. Her dark brown hair is cut short in a bob, and frames her face elegantly. Her brown eyes don't reflect in the window, and reveal nothing to her.

She unzips the side pocket of her attaché case, takes out a letter that has been folded in both directions with sharp creases, and starts to read.

I waved good-bye to my girlfriends as the yellow school bus pulled out to take them over the hill to the next town, and I turned into the lane that led from the main road to the house. I checked my bag to make sure I still had Lucy's present. It was her tenth birthday and I'd bought her a tape of Donny Osmond. She'd heard The Twelfth of Never on the

radio, and her bedroom wall was plastered with pictures of him looking clean and healthy that she'd cut out from her innumerable teen magazines, so I thought it would be a good present. Also in my bag were three books for homework assignments. It was tough being a sophomore.

Approaching the house I noted the collection of cars outside. The birthday party would be in full swing, and it looked as though some of the moms had stayed around to help out. One car jarred on my nerves, an old beat up maroon Buick, with half a back fender missing. I didn't recognize it, but something about the tank-like shape filled me with foreboding.

Shrugging mentally I ran up the back stairs to the house, now less white and needing a paint job, into the kitchen. Mom was there with Auntie Jo and two women I didn't recognize, presumably mothers of a couple of Lucy's friends. They were lighting candles on the cake, 20 because ten didn't look very impressive, and gathering together plates and plastic forks and spoons.

"Hello darling," mom said, "take this in for me will you?" She handed me a stack of paper cups and a bottle of 7-Up.

Timmy burst through the door to the living room, nearly knocking me flying and said "Mom! Lucy's friend keeps trying to kiss me. She said I'm cute! And Uncle Frank won't make them stop."

My heart skipped a beat. That's why I knew the car. "Uncle Frank? What the hell's he doing here?" I asked.

"Really Cynth, that's not very welcoming. We haven't seen Frank in ages, what with his traveling all over, and all you can say is 'What's he doing here?' Go in and say hello. And Timmy, you should be pleased girls want to kiss you. Now help your sister with these plates."

She ruffled Timmy's hair and gave him some paper plates. These ones had Donald Duck on them, which I thought was a bit young for Lucy. I couldn't remember if I was still into Disney characters at her age.

Mom looked radiant. She was in her element, organizing the party and looking after the kids. She cut her hair short now it was changing color (as she put it, going gray as I put it) and it suited her. She seemed to age quickly after dad died, her cheeks becoming sallow and lines appearing round her eyes like cracked ice on a pond. But within the last year or so, she started to improve again. The catering business was thriving. She'd even opened a couple of new cafes; Flo had been thrilled. Occasionally she'd even bring a man home or tell us she was going on a date, but I don't think these relationships ever became serious. It was just the acceptance that there was life after dad that helped her. Now she looked as good as Lucy's friends' moms, some of whom were at least five years younger.

The thought of going into the living room and facing Uncle Frank dispelled the delight I felt seeing mom so happy. I pushed the door open, being careful not to concuss any stray children hiding behind it. The tableau that confronted me gripped me like a frightening attack of *déjà-vu*. Frank was deep in the sofa. He hadn't lost weight. In fact if anything he

was even fatter. Lucy was sitting on his lap. He appeared to be saying something to her quietly. She giggled.

Frank noticed me standing in the doorway swinging the heavy glass 7-Up bottle. I tried to look as antagonistic as possible. He moved as quickly as his blubber would allow, lifting Lucy off his lap and on to the carpet, saying “That’s enough stories for you, young lady. Time for some cake now.”

The strange thing was, I couldn’t remember exactly what had happened with Frank. It was a dark, shapeless foreboding I felt when I heard his name, rather than any specific memories of his wrongdoing. His reaction to me on the few occasions I had seen him during the previous four years confirmed that I had good cause to be leery, but he hadn’t done or said anything to hurt me, so sometimes I wondered why I felt the way I did.

Mom, Jo and the other mothers came in with the deep, square cake dripping with frosting, its pink, blue and white candles ablaze. The fancy lettering on top of the pink icing read “Happy Birthday/To Sweet Lucy/From All Your Loving Family”. There were assorted circus animals drawn in colored icing around the edges of the cake. Mom set the cake down, got everyone to sing Happy Birthday, and then Lucy blew out the candles. Uncle Frank helped her and she hugged his neck in gratitude. A needle-sharp stab of pain pierced my heart as I saw Frank’s hand move down Lucy’s back and linger on her girlish bottom.

I gave Lucy her Donny Osmond tape and she gave me a big kiss in return and told me I was her favorite sister ever. “In that case,” I said, “you can be my favorite sister too.”

“Yippee!” she exclaimed. She skipped around her friends showing them the tape. She was still a lovely child. Her hair was longer now, on her shoulders, still golden. Her good nature made her popular at school with the teachers and other kids. She wasn’t exactly an A-grade student, academically speaking, but she was blessed with the looks and personality that in later life would open most of the doors she needed access to.

I had taken more after mom in my looks. My girlfriends all told me I was pretty, but I wasn’t so sure. My hair would just lie flat on my head unless I washed it twice a day, and I’d certainly had more than my fair share of zits, though they seemed to be on the wane now. I dieted often, trying to avoid greasy or sugary foods, and that helped. Dan said I was gorgeous, but I suspect he was talking more about my body. Dan was the boy I was seeing. It was nothing serious, just kissing mainly. He would get excited when I let him use his tongue, and he would try to grope me. It was hard work to keep him under control sometimes, especially when I started to get caught up in the excitement as well. Usually we would just listen to music or hang out at the soda fountain with friends. I was happy with my figure, though. I’d inherited another of mom’s traits: a slim body and a large bust. My breasts were still growing and when I wasn’t worrying about acne, I worried whether they were growing too big, but looking at mom reassured me that they shouldn’t become enormous.

The birthday party wound down and I helped mom and Jo with the clearing up. I was pleased Frank didn’t stay long, and hoped that it would be the last we saw of him for a while. Forlorn hope: his visit was the precursor to his re-establishing himself as a regular

guest, mainly at weekends, just like the old days. I kept a careful eye on him, especially when he was around Lucy, and he appeared to be behaving himself.

Spring made way for summer and we had a long phone call with Auntie Flo on the Sunday that was nearest the anniversary of daddy's death. It had become a family tradition. Mom and Flo talked for the longest, but we would all get a turn. Flo was happily married to Rowland. He'd had a couple of minor chest problems and had been advised to give up smoking his pipe, but I got the impression that Flo doted on him and that made up for any loss he felt over quitting smoking. She hadn't taken a job but had gotten involved in the faculty wives scene. It kept her busy, arranging parties and other social events, and with the exception of one or two prima donnas who felt overshadowed by Flo's energy, she got on well with them all. She promised to come and see us before the autumn.

Dan's house was closer to most of our schoolmates' than mine, so we tended to meet up there a lot. This was especially true on Sundays when his parents would often be out playing a round of golf. Sometimes we got some alcohol, and a couple of them had started smoking, but looking back now, I'm amazed by how well behaved we were, especially being bombarded with images of free love and the tail end of the sexual revolution as we were. Our parents would have been shocked to learn we'd been drinking alcohol and indulging in petting; that was enough rebellion for most of us.

One Sunday in late August I'd cycled to Dan's to meet up with the usual gang. I was supposed to be bringing my brand new LP of *Dark Side of the Moon*, but it had totally slipped my mind. Dan was a bit miffed, and his older brother offered to give me a ride home to pick it up, so I went back for it. It was about two in the afternoon. At the house, I was confronted by the unwelcome sight of Uncle Frank's car. I let myself in the front door while Dan's brother stayed in the car; I told him I wouldn't be long. It must have been my habitual distrust of Frank that made me tip-toe up the stairs. I paused outside Lucy's bedroom (she had her own room now; it used to be dad's study) and listened. There was an indistinct voice coming from the room, but unmistakably a man's. I crouched down to the door handle and pressed my eye as close as possible to the keyhole to get the widest view. What I saw made bile rise in my throat.

I suppressed my gagging reaction and fled quietly down the stairs. At the bottom, I leaned against the hall wall, trying to breathe calmly, and trying to decide if what I was going to do was the right thing. I went to the kitchen and found mom putting away the last of the cooking utensils. Timmy was playing with the magnetic animals on the refrigerator.

"Hi, honey. Back already?"

Without saying anything I took her hand and pulled her through the living room to the foot of the stairs.

"Where's Frank?"

I pressed my finger to my lips, imploring her with my eyes to be silent. Her eyes showed recognition and fear. She whispered "Dear God, no."

We climbed the stairs stealthily. At Lucy's door I slowly turned the handle and quickly

pushed the door open. Half of me was hoping that I'd imagined it all and Frank would be sitting innocently on the side of the bed reading Lucy a story. The other half, the half that knew what I'd seen, hoped that he hadn't stopped, so that mom would see her brother for the monster he was and drive him from the house forever.

On hearing the door, Frank twisted his head round. He was standing. His pants were at his ankles. Lucy was kneeling before him, one hand gingerly touching Frank's distended penis, which was just visible under the canopy of his belly. Frank's left hand was placed at the back of Lucy's head, pushing it towards his obscenely swollen member. Mom's hands rushed to her mouth and throat. Frank grabbed his pants and pulled them up hurriedly, almost tripping as he did so. He pushed Lucy away, as though trying to imply she'd been molesting him. His eyes were wide and filled with blind terror, and rightly so. Mom's protective instincts took about five seconds to recover. She rushed over to Frank and rained blows down onto his head.

"Get out, get out, get out, get out!" she repeated over and over again. Frank raised his hand above his head to try to protect himself and he lolloped to the door. As he passed me, I had a split-second vision of tripping him and pushing him down the stairs, but I could never have acted on the urge.

Mom swept Lucy up into her arms. "Oh my poor baby, what did he do to you? Don't worry, you're safe now."

"He made me touch him, mommy," Lucy said, her voice starting to crack.

"I know honey. Shh. Don't worry. Mommy's here now. Everything's all right." Tears were falling from her eyes, anointing Lucy's head.

"He told me you'd be mad at me if I didn't do what he wanted."

"Shh. It's OK, baby, you didn't do anything wrong. Just hold on to mommy."

I couldn't leave mom after that. I went down to give Dan's brother the record and tell him I wouldn't need a ride back. I'd pick up my bike some other time.

"Who was that guy who came rushing out? He looked like he'd seen a ghost. I thought he was having a heart-attack."

"Oh no-one. Tell Dan I'll see him tomorrow, OK?"

"Yeah sure, take care, Cynth."

I went back upstairs. Timmy had gotten bored waiting for mom to return to the kitchen and was standing in Lucy's bedroom doorway.

"What's the matter with mom and Lucy?" he asked me.

Mom's voice came from the bedroom. "Take him away Cynth. I'll... I'll talk to him later." She was having trouble speaking coherently.

"Come on, Timmy." I took him back downstairs and played a game of Scrabble with him. He didn't know many words with more than two syllables, which made the game a bit dull, but he enjoyed trying to make multiple words in one go, and it was a good way of

distracting him from the scene upstairs. I wished I could erase it from my mind it as easily.

We put Lucy and Timmy to bed early that night. I sat with Lucy while mom tucked Timmy in.

“Will Uncle Frank stop touching me now?” she asked.

“Yes he will. You don’t have to worry about Uncle Frank anymore.” I wondered just how long it had been going on. I’d been so careful to watch him whenever I could. Maybe it was only the second or third time.

“Good!” Lucy said. She turned on her side, held her pink teddy bear closer to her, and put her thumb in her mouth. “Is mommy going to be all right?”

“Of course I am,” said mom, who was standing by the door. She came over and ran her fingers, which were still shaking slightly, through Lucy’s fine yellow strands. “Now you get to sleep, but come and tell mommy if you have any bad dreams.”

“OK. Night mom, night Cynth.”

I pulled the door but left it slightly ajar so we could hear Lucy if she called out.

“Do you want a sandwich or anything?” I asked mom downstairs.

“No, I couldn’t eat.”

We sat in front of the fire. The temperature had dropped unseasonably in the last week or so, but the chill we felt wasn’t from the weather.

“What are we going to do mom? We should call the police.”

“I know, but he’s my brother.”

I paused and swallowed. “Yes, and he’s molested two of your children.”

Mom looked at me, shocked. “Oh no, Cynth. Not you as well? When?”

I told her all about it. Seeing him with Lucy in the bedroom had brought it all back to me. I explained to her why I’d never told her, because I thought I’d frightened him off, and because I thought I’d led him on.

“I don’t know what to do Cynth. I feel so awful. What kind of a mother have I been? Letting him do those things to you and Lucy. John warned me, he knew there was something wrong with Frank. Something happened when I was a little younger than you are now and Frank was 19. A girl in a park. I didn’t know very much about it. I mentioned it your father once, and he questioned my mother until she told him all the details. I didn’t want to know, I thought it was just some isolated thing that Frank had done in his youth.

“How can I make Lucy believe I love her after what I let happen in her own bedroom, when I should have been there to protect her?” Her voice was rising and she seemed close

to hysteria.

“Quiet, mom. There was nothing you could have done. He’s evil. Or at least very sick. He took advantage of the situation both times. That’s why you’ve got to go to the police. We can’t let it happen again. Next time he might grab another kid from a park or something.”

“Dear God, he wouldn’t do that, would he? You’re right.” She hesitated. “But he’s my flesh and blood. They’ll send him to jail.”

“Mom, I told you, he’s sick. They’d send him to a hospital. They’d do it for his own protection and well as the kids’.”

“But Lucy would have to be questioned by the police. And in court. So would you. Could you do that?”

We carried on like that for hours. Mom got more and more confused, and I became ever more determined. In the end mom said she’d sleep on it. Maybe for a couple of days. She had to do the right thing. The important thing right now was that Lucy and I were safe. I nearly called the police myself, but couldn’t do it behind mom’s back.

I saw the police cars’ flashing lights as I stepped off the school bus on the Tuesday afternoon, two days later. Good, I thought to myself, she’s called them. I wondered why they needed to have their lights on if they’d just come round to ask mom some questions.

A policeman was standing at the bottom of the steps that led to the front door. “Cynthia?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied, warily.

The policeman signaled to a group standing at the side of the house which I hadn’t noticed before. A woman, not in uniform, detached herself from the group and came toward us. She wore a bright plaid skirt and orange blouse. Her colorful dress contrasted with the expression on her face, which was gray.

I was led into the house, and the woman took me upstairs. I asked where mom was. She said she was talking to some other policemen and I’d be able to see her soon. The woman, whose name was Janice, asked me what I knew about my uncle. I told her what had happened on Sunday, and what he’d done four years earlier to me, and that I was pleased mom had called the police at last.

Janice told me some of what had happened. The rest I found out later. Frank had gone to Timmy and Lucy’s school and waited for Timmy. He’d probably been there Monday too, but Lucy had been with him and she would have known not to go with Uncle Frank. On Tuesday Lucy stayed behind for a dance class, and one of the moms was going to bring her home. Timmy, delighted to see his Uncle Frank, got into the car. When Timmy didn’t arrive on the school bus, mom called the school, frantic. No-one knew where Timmy was, so they alerted the police. Mom told the police everything about Frank, certain that he must be involved. She described his old Buick. The police spotted it at a rest stop outside Dryden, six miles from Ithaca. Frank saw the police car cruising by, panicked and pulled

straight out onto the highway. His car was hit side-on by a truck doing 60. Timmy was thrown from the car into the path of another vehicle. He died instantly. Frank went through the windshield and his jugular veins were severed. He landed on the median and died before an ambulance arrived.

A month after that Tuesday, there had been no improvement. Mom wouldn't or couldn't talk. She just stared into space. Occasionally she'd say "Timmy?" as though hearing a voice, then she'd go quiet again. She lay in bed, not taking food unless it was forced into her mouth. She went to the bathroom where she lay. Flo flew back as soon as the police called to tell her what had happened. She helped with the funeral. I refused to have anything to do with Frank's burial. We had them put Timmy's ashes in the urn with daddy's.

I told the police that Pete and Jo were the closest friends. They helped Flo and me with mommy. We managed to shield Lucy from the worst of it. She knew mommy was sick. We couldn't hide the fact that Timmy was gone. She was very upset. It reminded me of when they'd told me about dad. We just tried to insulate her from the worst of it.

As for me, I don't know how I coped at all. Seeing mom like that was almost worse than knowing Timmy was dead. I could see her age and fade daily. I prayed, literally, and for the first time, that she would snap out of it, come back to us. But instead she just got worse. She was close to starving because we couldn't feed her. The general hospital insisted they couldn't do anything for her, so Flo and Peter and Joanne arranged for her to go into a psychiatric nursing home in Albany. It was expensive but some of dad's life insurance remained, and I know that Pete and Flo put up some money. Eventually Flo managed to find a buyer for the catering business, and that money ensured that mom would be looked after until she got better.

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"Albany. This is Albany."

The middle-aged woman jerks her head up from the letter. She has just read it for the third time since taking it out of her case. She rises quickly, pulls her coat and suitcase down from the rack and alights the silver-bodied train.

She looks around, sees the exit and walks briskly toward it. Outside there has been rain, but now it's stopped. Taxis pull up to collect newly arrived passengers and splash the waiting line of people. The woman eschews the taxis and looks from side to side.

A blonde woman in her early thirties rushes up waving excitedly.

"Cyn! Cynthia!"

The older woman smiles and embraces the tan blonde one. They hold each other for a long time. The blonde one is breathless.

“You are silly, we could have picked you up in New York. Coming on the train! Here let me take that. Come on, Rob’s in the car and the kids are at the hotel with Auntie Flo. You should see her; she hasn’t aged a bit.” She leads Cynthia by the hand.

A tall, expensively suited man with a southern California tan gets out of the car. He kisses Cynthia abstractly. “Hi Cynthia. Good to see you again.”

“Hello Rob. Lucy, how’s mom?”

“She’s OK, Cyn. Well, what is it they say? As well as can be expected under the circumstances? We’ll see her soon.”

Mom never did improve. Lucy and I were adopted by Pete and Jo. Everyone thought it was best for us. Flo stayed in Ithaca. Rowland joined her as soon as he could get away, about two weeks before Christmas. They stayed till the start of the spring semester. Rowland was the same. Slightly older, slightly more stooped, but still calm and gentle.

Pete and Jo were the kindest parents anyone could ask for. They showered us with love. Lucy responded to them well, even better than I did. When I was ready to graduate high school, Peter told me about an endowment that Cornell had set up in remembrance of daddy after he died. If I wanted to, I could use it to go through school there. I couldn’t think of anything better to do while waiting for mommy to get well, so I studied law there. On qualifying, I moved to New York, joining the firm of Schwartz, Lieberman and Schwartz. I would travel to Albany once a month. Over the years the frequency dropped. There was never any change in her condition. She’d gone away, somewhere deep inside herself. The staff of the home promised they let me know if there was any sign of a change.

I made a home for myself in Manhattan. I have colleagues who have become friends, even some clients who have become friends, though we handle a lot of divorce cases, so we don’t fraternize too much with clients.

I’ve had boyfriends, or men friends I suppose, now that I’m halfway through my thirties. Lovers, let’s say. No one person for very long. I usually end it first. Something doesn’t quite satisfy me about the relationship, so I terminate it before it can turn too nasty. I’ve seen enough bitter divorce cases to know what can happen when things are left to fester. I don’t worry about it. I think of Auntie Flo. She was 43 when she met Rowland, and they’re still together. I’ll be 35 next year; I’m not quite over the hill yet.

Lucy went through Cornell too, but studied molecular biology. I feel terrible for being amazed that she managed it, but I am. Somehow she has the knack of making all things seem effortless. Once she got her degree, she went to Berkeley to do her Masters, then a PhD. Finally she got a job with a Northern California biotech company, fell in love with the founder after three months, married him six months later, and now they have two lovely children, Beth and Michael. I see them once or twice a year. We’re sort of close,

Lucy and I, but their California life-style doesn't really fit in with mine.

About five years ago I got a call from Uncle Pete. He and Joanne were going to move to a smaller home as they were both retiring at the end of the academic year. They had a lot of mom and dad's old stuff that we'd kept when we sold the house, and they wanted to know if I wanted it, otherwise they would throw it out. I wanted to look through it, if nothing else, so I made the journey up to Ithaca and spent a weekend rummaging through all of the boxes and bundles.

A lot of dad's stuff was academic papers which I passed on to Peter to dispose of appropriately. Mom turned out to be much more of a hoarder, and I instantly regretted not having looked through the papers years before. There were Valentine's card from dad (I assume – most of them were sent anonymously), old stained recipes, childhood daubings that Lucy and I had done. She also kept a journal, which I never realized. I read through a waterfall of tears her entries for the period after dad died. It augmented my meager childhood memories, bringing whole series of events back to life. Now I don't know if the memories I have are real ones, or ones that I've read in mom's journals. I was so moved by the love she felt for those around her: daddy, of course, Flo, the kids, even Uncle Frank. She really had no idea what a monster he was until that fateful Sunday.

The last entry was for the day before Timmy died. She simply wrote "Cynthia's right, I must call the police. Frank might be dangerous. My conscience couldn't cope if he hurt some poor child." I couldn't fathom why she never made the call.

I brought all of her personal documents back with me. I keep them in a big trunk in my apartment. Some day I might ask Lucy if she wants to read them. Just as I was putting the last sheaf of letters in the trunk, a small photograph fell out. It was of mom. She must have been in her early twenties. It had the faded brown tint of another era. I put it in a locket, which I now keep around my neck.

A month ago, nearly twenty years after mom stopped speaking, I received a letter from the nursing home that looks after her. It said her health was deteriorating, but amazingly she'd said a few words. I cried when I read the letter. They didn't say what she'd said, but implied that anyone who would want to pay their last respects ought to try to see mom soon. I called Lucy and Flo, and Peter and Joanne, and they all said they'd come immediately. That was all I called; we'd more-or-less lost touch with the West Coast branch of dad's family after his mother died.

Ironically, I was the last to arrive in Albany. I had to stay in Manhattan for a day to hand over a particularly acrimonious case to one of my partners, and then the journey to Albany took longer on the train than I expected. The journey was so painful. I felt on the ledge of an emotional precipice and could do nothing to take my mind off the thought seeing mommy, and maybe even hearing her talk again. I must have re-read the letter from the nursing home five times.

Lucy and her husband met me at the station. She was her usual irrepressible self. I always feel when I meet Lucy nowadays that some of life's gravity must somehow pass straight

through her without having any effect. I'm ashamed to admit that I sometimes wonder what it would take to bring her down to earth, and it scares me think that I might be becoming a bitter and spiteful woman.

I wanted to drive straight to the home to see mom, but Lucy insisted I go to the hotel with them to freshen up and meet Flo and Peter and Joanne first. Lucy told me that Flo looked amazing, and she was right. She was 67 going on 45. She'd been right to stay in New Mexico; it agreed with her. I hadn't seen her for years and the reunion was tearful and heartfelt. I wanted to tell her immediately about all the things mom had said about her in her diaries, but knew that there'd be time for that later. Jo and Pete looked older, but seemed to be weathering retirement gracefully. I couldn't think of much to say to my niece and nephew.

Mommy had been asking to see me alone, and Rob offered to drive me to the home.

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The luxury rental car pulls up at the end of the gravel driveway leading to the large stone building, which is set in lush green grounds. Steps lead up to the reception area, and Rob escorts Cynthia that far, tactfully allowing a uniformed male nurse to take her to the room where her mother lies dying.

The old woman looks enfeebled. Her hair is totally white. Her lips are cracked, her skin like parchment. Cynthia blinks away the unavoidable tears. Her mother slowly moves her head to the side, open her eyes. They are yellow around the edges. She smiles faintly.

"Cynthia? Is that you?"

Cynthia tries to speak. No sound emerges from her constricted throat. She sits on the metal-framed chair next to the heavy hospital bed and takes her mother's frail right hand. There are liver spots on it. Cynthia dabs at her mother's cracked lips with the damp tissue nestling in the dish by the side of the bed.

At last she can say, "Yes mommy, it's me."

Another faint smile. "I had to tell you. You're the only one who would understand. I had to tell you before I go."

Cynthia closes her eyes.

"Tell me what mommy?"

"That day, the day after we saw Frank with Lucy. I was going to call the police. I promise I was."

"I know momma. I know. It doesn't matter. You couldn't help what happened."

She continues as if she doesn't hear her daughter.

"But he called round, you see? Frank. He called round on the Tuesday morning. I'd just

started dialing when he knocked on the door.”

Suddenly her body is convulsed by a violent coughing fit. The sound she makes seems impossibly loud for such a small body.

“Shh, mommy. Don’t speak. Drink some water.” Cynthia places a glass of water gently to her mother’s lips. The coughing fit subsides.

The old woman smiles at her daughter. “You always were the kind one. My kind baby. I’m sorry I went away from you.

“He promised, you see? He said he knew he needed help, and he would get it. But I mustn’t call the police, because they wouldn’t understand. I believed him, Cynthia. He was my brother. Then he took our darling Timmy away, because I didn’t call the police. Can you ever forgive me?”

Again Cynthia is speechless from emotion. Her shoulders heave with silent sobs. She squeezes her mother’s hand tight. Tears spoil her make-up.

“Oh mommy!” she eventually cries. “You don’t need forgiveness. You were the kindest, most loving mother any child could have. All you did is love Frank so much that you believed him. That’s not a sin. You didn’t have to punish yourself like this.”

The old woman nods almost imperceptibly and closes her eyes, the slightest smile on her lips.

“I knew you would understand,” she says.

Mommy died three days after I arrived in Albany. We had her cremated in Albany and took the ashes to the cemetery in Ithaca, so she could be with daddy and Timmy. We held a memorial for her there. Some people came to the service that I’d long forgotten. They all remembered mommy and what a kind person she was, and wanted to pay their respects. Lucy, Flo and I all vowed to stay in close touch. I might even take a vacation in California next year.

I thank God that mommy died in peace at last, but curse Him for letting her suffer her silent purgatory for so long. My heart is a shrine for her and every day when I wake up, I tell myself that, even living and working in Manhattan, I can channel some of the love she had for life through what I do. I’ve started by volunteering for a victim support group. It’s not much, but it’s a start.