1995

Keep your head above your heart

Deborah Hansen
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KEEP YOUR HEAD ABOVE YOUR HEART

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements of the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Deborah Hansen

July 1995

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ABSTRACT

KEEP YOUR HEAD ABOVE YOUR HEART

by Deborah Hansen

This thesis is a novel about a year in the lives of a mother, Grace, and her adult daughter, Germaine. The novel opens with the death of Grace's husband. This event sets in motion psychological turmoil for both characters. Introspective by nature, both women analyze their problems and plot a rational course for their lives, but the actual living of their lives does not proceed so easily.

Grace remarries within a few months of her husband's death. And then, believing that her actions were hasty and irrational, she tries to abandon her new relationship only to learn it is what she wants. Germaine discovers that her husband is unfaithful and immediately believes that her marriage has ended. She plans to leave her husband and take charge of her life; but instead, she learns that her marriage is beginning again.

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Preface

I have spent a little over a year working on this project. During this time, the people in my life, not only my family and friends, but also my tangential connections--those I see in exercise class, at the bank, at Safeway--seem to have conspired to ask me about it. They want to know what I'm up to. They want to know when exactly I'm going to finish the master's I've been working on FOREVER. They want to know what writing a novel has to do with a degree anyway. They want to know, if I am, indeed, writing a novel, when am I going to publish it. They want to know if it is based on my own life and where I get my ideas. Oh, yes, and then there's the final question: What's the novel about?

I guess all this attention should be flattering, but to me the writing process seems too amorphous, too right brain, to answer questions about the linear side of it. No matter how often I'm prompted to look at my writing process objectively and analyze the genesis of my ideas, it remains a mystery. Joyce Carol Oates expresses a similar feeling in Woman Writer:

Just as our historical beginnings are utterly
mysterious--why are we born? why when and as
we are?--so too are the beginnings of works of art
Conception (in contrast to the fully public fact of birth)
suggests not only the unknowable but the forbidden:
our birth dates are matters of public record but our dates
of "conception" are permanently shrouded in
mystery (4).

I embrace this passage. I wish to engage all who question me in rhetorical discourse concerning the seminal aspects of my ideas. But then I realize that the Safeway checker isn't interested in such rhetoric; in fact, the checker, needing to manage the checkout line, has adopted a pragmatism that excludes rhetorical discourse. So, without thinking too much further, I blurt out: It's about a mother/ daughter relationship. Which is true, the mother/ daughter relationship is the central concern, as I see it, and this would seem to be a sufficient answer, particularly when the checkout line is winding down the frozen food aisle. However, it's not sufficient to the people who have been hounding me, for they want to know more just in case I actually Get It Published and Have a Best Seller. They want to be on the inside track; in other words, they want the plot line. But I insist that the mother/ daughter relationship is important. Then everyone, every last one of them, responds: but you don't even have a daughter.

It is this response, over the months, that has directed my thinking. Despite the fact that I don't have a daughter, my creation of the mother role felt first hand to me. I thought about the psychological impetus that brought me to write about a relationship that I hadn't lived. As a woman, of course, I am a daughter. Also, as a fiction writer for over a decade, I have invented many situations. Yet my connection seemed to reach beyond these explanations. My knowledge of the mother to daughter role felt natural to me. I was as comfortable writing from the mother's point of view as from the daughter's. I felt a clear understanding of my characters, of their situations, and of their generations.

Perhaps much of my ease with both characters was achieved by my structuring my novel from the alternating points of view of the mother and the daughter. As a reader, I enjoy this format. Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club uses the first person point of view for all eight characters. Tan contains these different views by dedicating each chapter to one character's perspectives. Another novel I admire for its structure is Terry McMillan's Waiting to Exhale. As in the Tan novel, McMillan uses the alternating points of view of the four female characters. These shifts in view are more complex than Tan's work because Waiting to Exhale opens with the first person voice of Savannah, one of the four main female characters, and then changes to the third person voices of the other three characters. Despite what might seem to be awkward point of view shifts, McMillan achieved a natural flow as she wove the story from character to character. In my work, the story is told in the third person, but it is confined to the limited view of either the mother or the daughter. The division into chapters helped me contain the work by dividing it into small, manageable units. It also kept me in the consciousness of both of my characters for an equal amount of time which strengthened my affinity with the characters and their generations.

Although I liked equally both characters and both generations, I didn't write about a harmonious relationship. On the contrary, the central conflict of the novel reflects a strong generational rift. This schism is at the heart of all conflicts in the novel. I was fascinated by the fact that I felt as though I were both characters, yet they were in conflict with one another. I think of the conflict as a deep ambivalence concerning relationship.

I have long been attracted to stories that develop both dissension and camaraderie, stories that step beyond teenage daughter-rebellion to focus on a rebellious flow between the two. The Joy Luck Club epitomized this ambivalent exchange between mother and daughter. In this work the four mothers and daughters have different personalities and lives, yet they all share the same conflict.

What further attracted me to Tan's novel was that the conflict was rooted in the different perceptions of the characters. When the story is told from the daughter's perspective, the antagonism emanates from the mother. Conversely, the same story from the mother's point of view gives a different twist to the problem. In the series of vignettes about Waverly, a chess prodigy, and Lindo, her mother, they see the "Rules of the Game," as the chapter is titled, differently. When Waverly begins to win chess tournaments, she expects to please her mother. However, Lindo tells her daughter, "Next time win more, lose less" (97). Waverly believes that her mother doesn't understand the game. After all, the whole point is to win. But Lindo wants Waverly not only to win, but also to work hard on the whole process--to see beyond the end of the game; to see more than a game. But, to Waverly, these comments only reflect that her mother doesn't understand her, doesn't understand what she is doing.

Through a constant series of misunderstandings neither character understands the other's motives. While Lindo believes that she is teaching her daughter valuable lessons, Waverly feels that her mother is manipulating her. Waverly believes that in her mother's hands "[she] always became the pawn . . . [the mother] was the queen, able to move in all

directions, relentless in her pursuit, always able to find [Waverly's] weakest spots" (180).

At odds with their constant misunderstanding is the connection of a mother and daughter. Although there is the negative connotation in the chapter title, "Double Face," indicting a division, Lindo sees "double face" as the idea that her daughter is an extension of herself. When they are at the beauty parlor, the hairdresser says, "It's uncanny how much you two look alike" (259). Lindo thinks, "These two faces, so much the same. The same happiness, the same sadness, the same good fortunes, the same faults" (259). She believes in the interconnectedness between herself and Waverly. To her, this connection eases and explains conflicts between them. But while Lindo sees double face as the same face, Waverly fears the link. She insists, "I'm my own person" (254). Lindo responds, "How can she be her own person? When did I give her up? (254). The polarity in their divergent outlooks exaggerates their connection.

As in Tan's novel, my work concentrates on the strain of mothers and daughters perpetually misreading each other. Even when my characters set out on a conciliatory track they are derailed by miscommunication. What is needed is for the mother to guide her daughter. But the generational division impedes understanding of this need. Because of this problem, this misunderstanding, the daughter often chooses the opposite of what is beneficial for her.

In Joyce Carol Oates' short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" a story of teenage daughter rebellion, there is a flow of ambivalent emotions between the mother and daughter. The characters are

simultaneously attracted to and repelled by one another. On the one hand, the daughter believed that her mother "preferred her to [her sister]" and felt that "sometimes, over coffee, they were almost friends" (351). Yet on the other hand the mother's and daughter's "faces went hard with contempt" (351). Throughout the story, the mother scrutinized and disapproved of her daughter. The daughter was so exasperated by her mother that she "wished her mother was dead" (348). However, when the daughter believes she might be killed, "She cried out for her mother" and feared that she was "not going to see [her] mother again" (363). Yet, despite her apparent need for her mother, she chooses to leave with the man who is threatening her.

Similarly, throughout my novel, both mother and daughter make inappropriate choices because their ambivalent feelings toward each other direct them. When Grace tells her daughter, Germaine, that she is selfish, Germaine withdraws from her mother. Even though she had been seeking her mother out for guidance, she can't overcome their differences. This leave Germaine alone. To spite her mother, she chooses to abandon her own family.

My attraction to this type of story on a psychological level, led me to revisit my past writings. I discovered not only strong dissension, but also recurring patterns of alienation and abandonment.

In one of my stories while a mother is hospitalized for gall bladder surgery, her daughter is sexually accosted by the father of a child for whom she baby-sits. When the mother returns home, she refuses to hear about this incident. In another story the mother is so ashamed of talking about the female body with her daughter that her daughter learns about menstruation

through the Disney film shown at the local junior high. Her mother drives her to and from the movie in silence, never once mentioning the subject. Although these daughters have good mothers and close relationships with them, for some reason their mothers abandon them when they need them most.

I examined articles on the mother and daughter relationship and found that the motif of mother absence was, indeed, an identified pattern both in fiction and in life. The fact that this was a pattern interested me, but what was even more interesting was the fact that the pattern was viewed from different positions. Some viewed the idea of mother loss as tragic while others saw it as essential to female development. Adrienne Rich wrote that the "loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter is the essential female tragedy" (237). By contrast, Susan Peck MacDonald explains that mothers in nineteenth century novels were often absent because good mothers were so strong that they prevented the necessary trials of adolescence from occurring, and, hence, they retarded or prohibited maturation (59). Moreover, by being absent from their daughter's life, these mothers actually contributed to their daughters' trials and thus "goad[ed] the daughter into self-assertion and maturation" (59). I wondered about both of these ideas, for in my fiction the loss of the mother as a guide seems more poignant than tragic. And why couldn't a strong mother guide her daughter? Traditionally the male counterpart of the female coming of age story is one of apprenticeship. Unlike the female version, the boy has a mentor to help him. Why couldn't a female benefit from the same guidance?

This idea haunted me as my project advanced because, in this work too, the mother was absent when the daughter needed her. I speculated that this represented, as my friends reminded me, that I didn't have a daughter. Yet this seemed too easy. I was still linked to that interconnection, and believed that I was equally mother and daughter in my story. So why is the mother absent? My next investigation led me to see the conflict that women feel when it is time to pass on their role as a mother and a housewife to their daughter. Much of this conflict stems from living as a woman in a male-dominated society. The influence of this is pervasive. If a woman is reluctant to pass on the role of homemaker, she negates its importance. If she passes on her role with strength, she reinforces the role of subjugation. After all, if the woman does not share the power of the society equally with the man the "mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr" (Rich 236).

To further complicate my characters' problems, to further pull at the bonds of the relationship, both Grace and Germaine are torn by their relationships with men. As in real life, their lives are shaped by the "present-day patriarchal family" with its "division of labor by gender" and the "economic dependency of women" (Rich 61). Although these problems are not verbalized, the living of them carries implicit weight. Both characters fill the traditional role of housewife and mother, a role that demands allegiance to the husband. A mother's allegiance to her husband often leaves a child feeling like an outsider, abandoned. Germaine remembered as a child feeling separated from her mother as she sat in the backseat of the car and watched her parents together in the front seat. After the death of her father, Germaine

believes that she and her mother will travel alone together, but her mother takes a lover.

Despite their separations, there is a bond in most areas of their lives. For instance, Grace has passed the role of housewife onto her daughter. She should see this as a triumph, but even these connections are challenged by shifting generational norms. When Germaine leaves her husband, and thus abandons her role, Grace remarks to her friend, Helen, "our generation was a lot different from this one" (172). Helen replies that no one in their generation "thought of leaving her husband because frankly [she] had nowhere to go" (172). Helen's reply is telling for it reflects a paradox between their views and their lives.

Grace believes that the role of housewife carries weight and power, but, as Helen implicitly states it, their position is not one of choice. Grace does not view her position with a critical eye; instead she chooses to reinforce her sense of the power in it. To exemplify this twisted view, Grace feels that her position of power is strengthened by the continuance of the family even if it costs. When Grace found that her husband was unfaithful to her, she chose to ignore it. Keeping Hank's affair a secret gave her control and empowered her with the idea that she, and she alone, kept their family together. She expressed her view of this power-position to Germaine when Germaine came to her for help after discovering that her own husband is cheating on her. Instead of being a sympathetic ear, instead of providing comfort to her daughter, Grace told Germaine, "you don't throw away years of marriage over seeing your husband with someone else . . . it's your responsibility to hold it together . . . it's always the woman's responsibility" (147).

Shifting generational views aren't reflected by a change in lives or relationships, but, instead, they seem to be reflected solely in the way these women verbalize their situation. Germaine believes that she is a homemaker by choice. She believes that she will leave her husband after his affair. She believes that she will raise her daughter to be strong and self-assured. However, regardless of how she expresses it, she is a housewife. She only leaves her husband briefly. Her daughter is a demure, dependent little girl. In fact, the only thing Germaine succeeds in doing by expressing her life in contrary terms from her mother, is to continue the rift between them.

I found this type of estrangement fascinating. Alice Walker captured this conflict caused by shifting values in her short story "Everyday Use." In the story, Dee, the daughter, recognized the importance of her Grandmother's quilt as an artifact of the black female struggle, but she failed to see the value of her grandmother as a person. She failed to see that her mother represented the same struggles as the artifact did. Dee only saw her mother as ignorant and uneducated. Dee wished to identify with lofty abstract ideas while rejecting the human truth and value of them.

Germaine wrestled with a similar dichotomy. Germaine would say that housework and motherhood is valuable, but that the housewife and the mother represent the patriarchy. She feels that Grace was controlled by her role of mother and housewife because she never challenged it. What she failed to see is that when she devalues her mother, she devalues herself.

I believe, as do many women born in the early 1950s, that the value of the role of homemaker has been diminished. We recognize the dangers in our society of adopting our mother's values. For no matter how we label the

stay-at-home-mother, how often we jump in and say "oh, she's not just a housewife," her work is not valued. It is unpaid. It puts her one man away from homelessness. It earns her little toward retirement which can leave her penniless after her husband's death. These are realities. Women have had to adjust their views for their own survival. Yet, when I'm writing from Grace's point of view I feel an antipathy toward her position.

By the close of my work, Grace is empathetic with Germaine. She doubts that her tacit acceptance of her husband's infidelity actually held things together. In fact, she feels a culpability for her husband's withdrawal from their relationship. She says, "some of the things I criticized Germaine for most, I could trace back to me" (220). On some level, she wants a different life for her daughter than she's had. And then, almost as a reversal of their positions, Germaine returns home recognizing the power of keeping the family together. The conflict between mother and daughter is not resolved, but there is a hint of understanding. There is a hint of reunion. There is a shift in the paradigm.

Having finished this project, I could, and probably will, begin describing this novel by recounting its plot. I can see myself now in the Safeway check-out line. Yes, I will say, I have finished my novel. Well . . . it's the story of a woman who becomes widowed and remarries. It's the story of her daughter who leaves her husband and returns to him. It's the story of how their lives touch. Or a story of how they want their lives to touch but don't. And . . . well . . . it's really the story of a mother/daughter relationship.

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Chapter One

Grace

Grace Knudsen woke early in an energetic, optimistic mood. If she had been younger, and still turning over new leaves, this surely would have been a day to turn one over. Before she rose, she lay still, simply to take in the predawn darkness which seemed to carry her optimism. She imagined that she would look out to see snow contoured over the earth as if a silk sheet had softly billowed down, gracefully covering even the chain-link fence. On the 10:30 news, the night before, the weatherman called for flurries only, but Grace sensed more.

With this expectation, she had stopped to look over the backyard before she went to bed. As she stood at her window, she felt engulfed by a mood of change. She lingered with a sense of urgency to memorize every feature of her familiar backyard. The moon shone and the land looked hard, barren, in the shadows. Perhaps she would wake to this yard of dead, brown grass, and leafless trees; or, perhaps, it would all lie under a shroud of white, transformed by the first snowfall of the season. Snow meant boots, gloves, shoveling, slippery driving, and months of waiting for a patch of grass to reappear. Snow meant a still whiteness, and an insular silence--a peace. Grace had wished for the snow.

With that promise of peace, Grace rose to face the day. Her body seemed to welcome the cold air and she headed for the bathroom with a liveliness, a charge of activity, that she had once enjoyed every morning upon waking. She smiled at herself between brushing and flossing her teeth, washing her face, judiciously powdering bags and wrinkles, quickly applying

lipstick (wiping a tad from her front tooth), and energetically brushing her short, gray hair. She altered her routine a bit by first hanging her flannel nightgown on a hanger in the closet, and then, changing into wool slacks, a plaid blouse and a pullover sweater.

She didn't disturb the curtain nor raise the blind, for she wanted to experience her surprise bathed in the sunrise. If it had snowed, Grace's husband, Hank, would be running the snowblower all day. He'd go down the walk to the driveway and then out to the sidewalk and continue past all eight houses on the block. Since his retirement, three years ago, the neighbors had chipped in and hired him for this duty.

As soon as Hank would turn the corner toward the next door neighbor's, the droning sound of the snowblower would fade, and Grace would see Hank disappear. Grace would feel comforted knowing that another retired couple, three houses down, would be poised to hear the blower as though part of a relay team. Theran would wave at the door until she caught Hank's attention, and invite him in for coffee and rolls. Last year, when Hank returned home from his snowblowing duties, he recounted his visits with Theran in a way that made Grace picture Theran as Hank's lover. But, of course, Theran's husband, Clarence, was there, and Hank felt his real duty was to Clarence. Hank often told Grace little anecdotes about how he and Clarence had "gotten into it" over a health care issue or a hockey game. Clarence was a near-invalid due to heart disease, and Hank would sit with Clarence and offer him his companionship; in return, Theran would offer Hank lunch. If Clarence stayed awake long enough, Hank would be out of the house most of the day.

There weren't many days when Hank was gone. Mostly he played game after game of solitaire, puttered at his downstairs hobby which was making birdhouses or planters, sat in front of the TV nodding off--his head going down and up like a bobber after a fish's tug. When seeing Hank, it was hard to believe that he was living such a sedentary life. He could kick into action without a hint of old age, or inactivity. The snow blowing, for instance, never led to one complaint--a hitch in his back, or a pull at his shoulder. Although he had lost an inch or two in height over the years, he was nevertheless straight. Nothing hunched or lurched in his body. His fingers and toes were straight, his head held high, his walk quick.

However, it was as though every youthful cell in his physical self had been equally matched with a youthless cell in his disposition. Grace had noticed that almost over night, at the age of fifty, he turned into an old man. He quit dancing, swimming, going out to movies. He refused to own or use such "new" things as a VCR, computer, answering machine, or a foreign car. He mostly watched reruns from the sixties. He quit having sex; he quit talking and telling jokes about sex. Grace was forty-five when Hank got old.

This morning when Hank got up, he wouldn't be any older than he had pretended to be for more than twenty years, but his stillness weighed more heavily upon Grace since his retirement. You had to exercise constant patience to be around a man like Hank. His hearing was dimming; so was Grace's, but he played it up. She would test him by whispering something he really wanted to know and he always heard her. Yet, other times he might look up at her after she had been speaking for minutes and say "huh?" He couldn't even say: excuse me, or I'm sorry what did you say? He could only

grunt a subhuman “huh.” He couldn’t even say it early in the conversation. He would just sit there and let her go on and on.

But this morning, padded with the glistening snow, every irritation would seem quieted. As Grace passed Hank’s bedroom on the way downstairs, she took care not to wake him. She didn’t bother flicking on the kitchen light; the dawn lit her path. At the kitchen window she stood in the waxing light and watched the sun burst forth from a red ribbon on the horizon. There was only the slightest dusting of snow. Hank would be in all day.

Wrapped in a flurry of morning chores, Grace stood at the kitchen window many mornings reminding herself that Hank’s retirement was not hers. Grace would always have cooking, cleaning, marketing, sewing, and projects galore. Her work would never change. However, before Hank’s retirement, she had the house to herself all day. Back then, there were so many more things that she got done. Now it was even hard to plan for the day. Where would Hank be all day? Would he be at the kitchen table bent over his cards? Would he be creating sawdust in the basement? Would he want to tag along to the grocery store? Grace promised herself that she would take hold of this situation. Why couldn’t he find more things to do out of the house? Nobody would think it right for him to spend so much time just hanging around.

As she cracked and whipped eggs her movements were purposeful and punctuated with gestures to emphasize her words--first her unspoken words and then her outloud whisper. Whipping the whites and yolk into a

combined froth she stated emphatically, "Today, he can go to the store, alone. I'll give him a list." She trimmed a bagel and pushed it into the toaster. Hank had made such a fuss over the toaster oven their daughter, Germaine, had given them for Christmas that Germaine had taken it back. He had mumbled three or four times after seeing the picture of the toaster oven on the box, "Why would anyone want this when a toaster does the same job and takes up less space?" Of course he refused to hear that bagels, among other things, didn't fit into a toaster. "Who needs bagels? What's wrong with toast?" he said.

Grace left the bagel propped in the toaster, ready to be cooked once Hank was up. She ripped off a piece of paper from the tablet over the phone. She printed carefully: one red onion, toilet paper (the cheapest), bran flakes (generic), two bananas (no green ones), Land O' Lakes butter, broccoli, corn pads (generic), one Family Circle Magazine. She chuckled every time she listed a new item. She knew he would follow the list in order and that he would be going back and forth through the store. She did this without a trace of meanness; her motive was to keep Hank away for at least an hour.

Grace retrieved the Minneapolis Tribune from the front stoop. The air was frigid, and the paper frosty. She set it on the counter and began to set the table with the too-frilly lace place mats Germaine had given her. She spooned her homemade jam onto a China saucer, poured a little 1% milk into a baby-sized pitcher that matched the saucer, and placed it next to Hank's cup. She put water on for tea. She wouldn't begin cooking until she heard Hank get up and the toilet flush.

She ran the garbage disposal. It vibrated the counter tops as it chomped

up the orange peels from the fresh squeezed juice--the only kind Hank would drink. She leaned into the counter to look across at the neighbor's. Yesterday she had used glass wax to clean the window; today she didn't feel the irritation she had felt when looking out through the water spots Hank had left from shaking his hands dry before using a towel. Her view was partially blocked by three dwarf trees. She switched off the disposal and continued to look at the neighbor's quiet house.

How comforting it was knowing so much about her immediate neighbors. All of them had lived there fewer years than she had. In fact most of the houses had changed owners several times over. One of the remaining "dinosaurs" of the neighborhood lived in the white Cape Cod across the way. The house was being built when Hank and Grace moved in. Grace remembered the idea of having Italians for neighbors. At that time she said Italian with a long "I". Italians seemed as foreign to her as someone from outer space. But despite the fact that Grace and Hank reported to the whole neighborhood about the odd way that Sal and Helen ate spaghetti--with a fork and spoon--they became close. They shared their lives. Even the neighbor's daughter, Beth, was born the same year as Germaine.

Now Sal was gone, dead two years, and even though Grace couldn't look across the street without realizing that something was missing, that something was wrong, Helen acted as though she had always lived alone. Grace had watched Helen shoveling snow, cleaning out gutters, pushing the garbage cans to the end of the drive. Often a smile parted her lips.

Grace had just taken the omelet from the pan when Hank reached the

kitchen. "Perfect timing," he said. He looked past Grace, craning his neck. "Looks like only a dusting. Didn't get what you expected after all." He took his seat, shaking his napkin open.

"You should have seen it earlier. It's melted." Grace set the plate in front of Hank and took her seat.

"Believe it or not, I was looking forward to a few inches. I'm ready to fire up the snowblower." He scraped butter across the bagel with birdlike movements. "Bagels," he muttered.

"If you really didn't like them you wouldn't eat them," Grace said with a mouthful of eggs. She swallowed hard, harder than she wished to. "Even though you claim to eat everything, I certainly am the one to know better."

He lifted his eyes slowly from his bagel. The years had dulled them, yet still his coy behavior put a glint in them. "Huh?"

"I know that you like bagels?" She moved her lips as if he could read them, but he had already dropped his eyes back to the bagel.

"Pardon? You're mumbling. Your mouth is full." He shook his head looking at his eggs.

"Never mind. It wasn't important. If it were, you would have heard me." She moved her lips slowly.

"Huh?" He slowly moved his head up to look at her.

She tried to hold a cold, blank expression. She returned to her eating, accentuating her movements.

"I don't know why but I just can't get used to bagels. I'll always prefer toast," he said without the smile that Grace knew wanted to betray him.

"Do you want some toast?" she whispered.

"Yes, please."

"OK. Toast for you tomorrow. But you'll have to pick up some groceries for me?" She felt her heart quicken, and was angry that she feared he'd say no. Why couldn't she ask him such a simple favor? She was angry over her guilt. How could anyone expect her to be happy spending her golden years with a man who did nothing? Her mother would have called him a bump on the log. She wished that she could declare: today, Hank Knudsen, you're going to quit being a bump on the log.

"Why can't YOU go?" he asked.

"My back is bothering me. I woke up with tight muscles." She smiled sweetly. "I've made a list. I've explained everything. All you have to do is follow it." She got up and handed it to him. She sat down and finished her omelet.

He put down his tea and looked over the list. "What's this?" He pointed to bran flakes.

"Hank, it's cereal. You know that."

"I didn't. I don't pay attention. I thought we ate corn flakes."

"We haven't had corn flakes in twenty years. Bran clears out your colon. I'm keeping you alive, Hank." She got up and started clearing the table. She stopped and kissed the top of his head. He kept on eating, not missing a beat. She headed for the sink.

"I like corn flakes," he whispered.

Hank lingered at the hall closet looking for his heavy coat until Grace put down her dish towel to help him move things around. He was always

fishing for a mother's hand.

"For heaven's sake, Hank, it's right in front of your eyes." She helped him button the top button and straighten the collar. "There you go. All set." She patted his collar. She looked at his face a minute: he looked as bewildered as a little boy. "Come on Hank, you're only going to the store."

"I didn't say anything."

"I know, but you're acting like you're off on the space shuttle or something."

"I'm OK. I've shopped before."

"You have? When?"

"Well, when you had your gallbladder out."

"Hank, that was almost thirty years ago."

"I've been to the store with you. It's no big deal. I just don't want to get things that won't please you. That's all." He kissed her and gave her a quick, strong hug.

She watched him go out the front, putting on his hat. He pulled the garbage cans up to the corner of the house, smiled and waved to her. She heard the garage door open. She switched on the radio. There was a polka station that reminded her of their dancing days. She pulled the vacuum out and went over the kitchen floor, linoleum square by linoleum square, just as her mother had taught her to do with a broom.

For some time Grace had wanted to get to a box in the garage. The box was filled with her personal mementos. On the top were some of Germaine's baby items, awards and certificates from her school days, a few pictures from family outings, but underneath was an old letter and an old photograph. The

box had been there for years, but she wished to reorganize it; reread the old letters, think about the photograph. This box should have been stored in a private corner of the kitchen, somewhere that was more Grace's domain than Hank's. But often boxes of old photos had been shelved and forgotten there. It seemed inconspicuous enough.

After sufficient time passed, assuring that Hank would be well on his way, Grace put on her coat and headed for the garage. Walking through the breezeway, she tightened her collar against the cold. As soon as she opened the side door to the garage she noticed the light streaming in. The overhead door was up, and Hank's Buick was still there.

Everything registered as wrong. How many times had she thought about a phone call the nights Hank had come home late from work? A phone call--the nights when Germaine was a teenager and out driving on her own--the nights when her mother was in the hospital, or her father in the nursing home? But things don't happen the way you know that they will when you're worrying.

Hank's head slumped against the car window. Grace began talking outloud, using the sweeping hand gestures she used when she was a high school thespian, "He's dead. I know he is dead! I just know he's dead!" The pitch of her voice was rising. She choked out, "Why didn't I realize that I never heard the garage door go down?"

The top of his balding head was tipped against the glass. How would she get him out? "What do I do?" She was sobbing. She slipped into the passenger side of the car. The air smelled tight around her throat, humid and damp. His right hand lay tenderly on the car seat. She lifted his hand; it was

heavy. She wanted to put his hand against her breast, warm it. Bring him to life. Bring her to life. Without looking at him she felt for a pulse. "You just kissed me. You just smiled at me. Your lips were just warm and wet."

She thought maybe she should look at his face--maybe she should close his eyes. Would his eyes tell her of suffering? What had he died of? How could he be dead? "People don't die without warning, without some kind of warning!" She couldn't look at him. She placed his hand on the car seat. She hurried from the car. She needed to call someone. Her first thought was to call Hank. She needed Hank now. This was when she needed him most. She ran around to the garage door switch. She watched the door lower, the daylight squeezed out; dust filtered down from the dim light of the door opener, the light that was meant to guide them safely out of the garage.

Chapter Two Germaine

Choosing a dress for her father's funeral paralyzed Germaine. She held a Kleenex to her nose and mouth hoping to feign a cold or allergies. When the salesgirl approached, Germaine brushed her away saying, "I'm only looking. And I'm sure I can find everything I need by myself." She watched the salesgirl retreat to her register, and when the girl appeared to be sincerely busy, Germaine resumed shopping. Her efforts were odd and feeble. She stared at a brightly colored shift for several minutes even though it didn't interest her in the least.

She drifted over to a rack of darker colored clothes and sectioned off the black items. She let her hand travel across the top of the rack as if she were choosing a dress by Braille. Her fingertips stopped at a washable silk with a matching jacket. She let her hand dip inside the jacket and the material flowed across her palm. She pictured the garment as a black shroud. She wished that she could cover herself, disappear, escape the tedium of trying the dress on, of going to her father's funeral. She hoped that the salesgirl wouldn't try to get chummy. She didn't want to have to tell her that she was buying black for death's sake.

Once inside the dressing room, she broke into a sob, struggling to remain quiet. Suddenly it struck her that black just wasn't her color. It was an abrupt transition of thoughts, and she could only think about how she would look in black. She hadn't owned anything black for years, not since the blind date she had before she married Eric.

For a moment she fought back the impulse to recall that date and then

she sat on the bench in front of the three mirrored walls of the dressing room and recalled the black velvet pant suit she had specifically bought for the blind date. Back then, she wore her hair bleached blond, long, permed and full, and she believed that the black suit set off her hair. She had gone to the theater with her date, believing that she read in his eyes how stunning he thought she was. When they were finally seated, facing one another, for an after-hours dinner, he leaned and whispered, "Your complexion is flawless; your hands are a treasure."

Her mother had always warned about flattery. "Keep the motives behind flattery ever in mind," she would say. Despite these warnings, Germaine hoped for the standard niceties--lines to bolster her ego. 'You look beautiful' or 'what a night this has been' would have worked. To rationalize his comments, and her discomfort, Germaine decided that he was simply trying to hone in on something specific in order to sound more sincere. She hoped he was sincere.

"Thank you, but I'm sure it's not flawless . . . and . . . a treasure . . . well really," she said, straining in mock modesty. She sort of bounced her head to the side, forcing curls to fall across her shoulder inviting him to mention her hair.

"It is as close to flawless as I've seen, truly." He tapped the top of his wine glass to hers and gave her a slow tight wink. "In fact, your complexion would simply be radiant if you were surrounded in a pastel color, a warm peach for instance."

"Really," she said in a slow, sly tone. He was making her have serious doubts about him. Was this conversation heading toward pink satin sheets?

She wondered if he were truly weird, or just nervous. She pulled the black velvet collar down from her neck slightly.

"I can picture you in a soft pastel dress." He emptied the bottle of cabernet into his glass and downed it too quickly, smiling with an irritating bead of wine at the corner of his lip.

"Black is too harsh for my complexion. Is that what you're saying?" She was relieved that the conversation had turned to clothing rather than his bed.

"To be frank." He nodded his head. His dark hair looked a bit too perfect in the harsh overhead spotlight, like a plastic cap. He held a supercilious expression. And then, abruptly, he raised himself from his seat and said, "Anyway, hold on, I have to have a bowel movement." He smiled, stopping to add, "I hope you're not offended, but I have no hang-ups about bodily functions."

Germaine watched him walk toward the restroom. He was a weird one for sure. A flash of regret gripped her. Quickly she gathered up her things and walked out. She moved swiftly, turning several corners, until she felt safe enough to hail a cab. On the way home, she decided to accept no more blind dates. She believed she would swear off men.

That night, when she arrived home so early, Germaine tried to explain it to her father. It all seemed hopeless. Her date was a creep, but Germaine would protect her father from the truth. Besides, her father seemed to be born with a certain politeness that didn't allow him to criticize others. Even if she told him the truth, her father would remain neutral. Of course this was a commendable trait, but it made him seem incapable of really caring about

her problems.

Had her father really cared? Had she cared about his problems? Germaine watched her profile in the junction of the two mirrors. Once again she held the Kleenex close to her face to muffle her cry. She stood and removed her clothes and slipped the black dress over her head and looked at herself. She turned to see how the hem fell in back. Black was slimming; it made her look bony. But then this wasn't an occasion to be concerned with such details. Her father would never have offered an opinion about her clothing.

That evening, sharing the dinner table with her husband, Germaine realized that Eric rarely offered an opinion about her clothing either. She tried to explain her feelings about the black dress. She said, "Wait. Let me get it." She returned from her closet with the dress still on its hanger. She held it up to her. "Tell me truthfully what you think."

"It looks fine."

"Fine?"

"I can't really tell when you don't have it on, but I'd said that you look fine in black," he dropped his eyes back to the paper.

Germaine put the dress aside and sat before her plate. She pushed the food a bit, trying to think of a way to pull Eric to her feelings. She believed it essential that he understand her. For God's sake, she was talking about her father's funeral and he was reading the paper. "It was hard buying this dress."

"Well, it looks fine."

"That's not what I mean."

"Oh?" Eric lowered the paper and gave Germaine his look of mock

exasperation, raising his eyes to the ceiling and clicking his tongue. "OK, tell me what you mean."

Germaine pushed her fingers through her hair, flipping it and changing the part to the opposite side. She had spent a year growing her bangs out, and had just had her hair cut to her shoulders so that it was all one length. Her mother had worn her hair in the exact same style back in the fifties. Germaine didn't remember her mother's looks from back then, but she had a picture of her mother with the same hairdo. She wondered if her mother would see herself in Germaine. Germaine couldn't wait until her hair grew longer. After all, it wasn't unnatural for a daughter to resist looking like her mother. "I don't know how I'm going to comfort my mother. How I'm going to hold up. I don't want to see my father in a coffin."

"Nobody wants to see her father in the coffin, Germaine. But everyone knows they will have to unless they go first. You'll hold up, and time will ease the pain. And your mother is unsinkable." Most people would believe that Eric's eyes were focused on Germaine's. Despite his platitudes, he had a genuine look of concern. He had the expression of a woman comforting an injured child, trying to absorb the child's pain in her face. He continued to gaze at her and express pain long after his words ended.

Germaine kept the silence, knowing that Eric was looking nowhere. In fact, she knew that he was seeing a blank, that he was more interested in his act than in her feelings. This was the technique he had perfected over twenty years of being a surgeon and telling people they were going to die. She wanted to say, cut the bullshit Eric, but she had learned that this would not accomplish her goal. She was always aware of accomplishing her goals.

Emotional outbreaks only bring the most momentary satisfaction; they rarely get you what you want. What she wanted most from Eric was to make him feel that she was unprovoked by him.

It struck her, at that moment, how vulnerable she had let herself be when she first met Eric just after she moved to Jacksonville, Florida from Minneapolis. Well after all her previous date was the ill-fated blind date, and there was no comparison. Eric was the epitome of social graces. He was conservative, friendly, cordial, and always a great date. He never mentioned her complexion; he never resorted to hyperbole. He would say she looked beautiful. He would tell her that he never enjoyed anyone as much as he enjoyed her. He made the right moves.

They would leave his condo following dinners he had cooked and drive south to a deserted beach where they would lie on a blanket under the sky just to count the shooting ones. They attended the symphony and the artist series at Jacksonville University and The University of North Florida. They would drive down to St. Augustine for a new kitchen gadget, or they would drive up to St. Simon's Island to watch the dolphins in the marshes. They spent all their free time together.

Before Eric, Germaine had felt lonely and isolated in Jacksonville. A college roommate had talked Germaine into leaving Minneapolis. The roommate said, "Jacksonville's a gold mine just waiting for the miner." Germaine had always found that her roommate Carole Anne was as hokey as her metaphors, but Germaine believed things were taking off in the sun belt. More than anything, Germaine wanted to make it, to be independent. Four years after graduating, Germaine was still living with her parents. The

wonderful advertising jobs that she interviewed for never came through, and she ended up doing catering for various entertainers who played Minneapolis on their tours--the same job she had as a student.

The warm weather in Jacksonville was a treat for her. But Germaine hated just about everything else in the area. The lines of the marshes of Florida were flat and low. The trees seemed scrubby. The houses and architecture were lackluster, utilitarian.

She and Carole Anne opened a catering business; in four months Germaine bought Carole Anne out, and although she would never call it a gold mine, she had more business than she could handle. She had a new car, money in the bank, and was planning a trip to Europe.

Financially, she was in good shape, but her social life was non-existent, until she was hired to cater a Christmas party for Eric. At the time she was still doing a lot of the cooking and preparation herself. She loved the kitchen in Eric's oceanfront condo. He recently had it remodeled with a six burner Wolf stove and a Sub Zero refrigerator. The traffic pattern of the kitchen was arranged for cooking--real cooking.

That evening as she was removing her white heavy-duty double wrapped apron, Eric cut right through all the preliminaries and asked, "So, are you a married woman?"

"No," she sort of guffawed out the word.

"Sorry to startle you."

She shrugged and shook her head. "I didn't mean to seem so startled, but it was a surprising question."

"OK, I'll try to keep this line of questioning up then. Are you

committed?"

"Are you trying to ask me out?" She felt uncomfortable. Not only was this unexpected, but she was tired, and longed to get home and shower.

"I asked a question first," he said with a boyish ring to his voice. Even after a long evening of hosting he seemed fresh and untouched by the event.

"Well, neither, but it appeared that the woman you were with tonight feels that you have a commitment." She hated herself for starting off with such a jealous sounding statement. She wished that she would have been cool and acted as though she hadn't noticed him all evening.

"Well I can't tell you how she feels, but we've dated off and on. Mostly off, at her instigation." He sounded comfortable talking about the fact that a woman was dumping him. "May I take you out?"

They married ten months later.

The dining room lights seemed harsh as Germaine leaned over Eric and scooped up her silverware putting it on her plate. He raised up the paper and she took his plate and slid it under hers. She kissed him on the forehead. He looked up at her and smiled. He had always had the look of success. He always seemed tanned, relaxed. He was good looking.

He put down the paper and said, "I'll help you." Even though their housekeeper, Marsha, came in every weekday morning, they always tidied up. Eric would trip over Germaine at the last moment to remind her that no job was too menial for him.

They both seemed to want the house especially clean, for Marsha would stay while they were in Minneapolis for the funeral.

"We need to leave here about 6:00 A.M.. Is everything ready?" Eric always managed the details when they traveled.

"I'm packed. Are you?" Germaine scoured the sink which was one of Marsha's jobs.

"Pretty much. Let me make sure I have everything."

After Germaine washed the Ajax down the sink, she sprinkled more on without thinking. She made circle patterns with the cleanser, moving her hands counter-clockwise and then clockwise. Memories of her father overwhelmed her unexpectedly. That seemed normal, but the sense of debilitation was unexpected, unknown to her. Maybe this was because she hadn't expected her father to die without some warning, without a chance for her to prepare.

Today, after she left the department store and was driving away from the mall, she had a memory of her father sitting next to her in the passenger seat. His hands were folded between his knees. He was wearing Bermuda shorts and his knees looked so knocked, so boyish, that it touched Germaine in a way that nothing he had ever said to her had done. They were silent, but Germaine wished they could talk.

Her parents had spent most of February in Florida visiting them. Her dad would run errands with Germaine while her mom stayed behind to look after dinner. At the time, her father as passenger, struck Germaine as a role reversal. Her dad always demonstrated his sureness in roles: Men drove. Women rode. Men worked. Women cooked. It was unspoken, but it always worked that way in their family. Always. And there he sat, appearing comfortable with her driving.

Germaine was overpowered by this memory of his presence. She slammed on the brakes. She turned toward his image. He turned slowly, dreamlike and said, "You're not the happy little girl. . ." His words trailed off, and he was gone. The cars behind her were honking and she couldn't drive until someone got out of his car and tapped on her window. She jerked her head toward the man who looked more perturbed than concerned. He signaled for her to roll down her window, but she sped onto the highway instead.

Germaine felt so completely unprepared for father's death. She hadn't spent time guarding her words or actions fearing that it would be the last time she would see him. She never took precautions with her aging parents. Instead her words were controlled by her care to say things that would be productive--a technique she had worked on in therapy. Now she stood in the kitchen and strained to remember her last words to her father. What were the possibilities? Surely they were pleasant and cordial, but did her father know that they were an expression of her desire to keep peace in her life? Did her father sense her lack of genuine concern for him? She wanted to know what he thought of those words. She wanted to say things to him--no, she wanted him to say things to her.

She stood stock still, her hands in the sink covered in Ajax. Eric walked up behind her and leaned over to turn the dishwasher on. "The sink's clean by now," he said. The water poured over the dishes in the machine and the dishes scraped and grated under the pressure of the jetting water. "Well that's done," Eric said. "It's almost 7:30. Why don't we both go

to pick up Natalie from the gym?"

Germaine knew that this was Eric's ploy to keep her busy. Eric would use his skills to keep the recovery process neat and timely. "You go. I need to think things out," she said.

"Do you know if Natalie finished her homework?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Well, I was just wondering how her concentration has been."

"She seems fine, Eric. She's never lived close to her Grandfather. It probably makes things easier for her."

"You're right. Be back in a bit." Eric grabbed the keys and jingled them in a way that seemed a bit insensitive to Germaine, too carefree. Surely Germaine was overreacting. Eric loved her father more than he loved his own.

As she heard the car pull out of the driveway, Germaine realized she should have gone with him. Their house always seemed cold and sterile with no one in it. Eric had designed it in the early '80s when the industrial look was waning, but he still wished to retain the sense of openness of a warehouse. Everyone who knew Germaine commented on how different the decorating was between this house and the Victorian duplex she had rented before their marriage. The waterfront side of the house was a wall of glass, and the interior had exposed bricks and pipes. The house was set at the edge of twenty acres overlooking the swamps and the Intracoastal Waterway. They were far enough south of Jacksonville's beach communities that from the glass side of the house you couldn't see lights of neighbors. There was the blackness of flat terrain. The trees gave way to swamps just at the edge of

their house and didn't pick up again until well on the other side of the waterway.

Germaine sat on the black leather loveseat. The nearly full moon was covered by clouds that drifted past in layers. Germaine thought of the cloudy sky as a banal symbol for gloom and doom. She tried to force herself to adopt a sense of irony over looking into an abyss directly following her father's death.

She thought of the time that she went to the cabin with her father when her mother was in the hospital with gall bladder problems. She remembered it as the only time she spent alone with her father. It had stormed all the way up to Lake Pokagama. Past Grand Rapids the roads were dirt, and the car bounced like mad while the wind whipped the tree branches and the sky flashed with lightning. Her father seemed unconcerned. She remember him humming. Three days later, when returning to the Twin Cities, they stopped at a restaurant and learned that they had narrowly missed a tornado which ripped through just south of the lake. But Germaine's father would never play things up. While others were proclaiming their luck, their wisdom, their skill at escaping the storm, her father only said that they had never been in any direct danger. Was it dispassion or security that drove him?

Germaine wondered how her father had felt about that trip. Germaine had felt that she had taken her mother's place. She sat in the front seat, her mother's seat. She would get the water from the outdoor pump; she would fix breakfast and lunch. She wasn't much older than Natalie was now, yet she could pick up the slack her mother's illness created.

When Germaine and Eric first dated they would tell each other childhood anecdotes, and now she felt as though she would never share any of these memories again.

Natalie came in before her father. At twelve this was already her sixth year of gymnastics; she was one of the stars of the gym. She wore a blue warm-up suit with First Coast Gymnastics lettered across the back. During Natalie's gymnastic meets, Germaine would watch Natalie execute a perfect dismount and wonder if she would retain that unnatural arch to her back. She wondered what she would do for the rest of her life once the thirty hours a week she spent in the gym were gone. She wondered if her skin would always be pale and translucent.

When Germaine was twelve she took dance lessons. She was drafted into a Christmas performance at her school. She was one of the twelve days of Christmas. She was used to recitals, but this was different. This was for her school. They made her wear a little cotton tank top. She had little buds for breasts as Natalie had now. She was sure that all eyes were focused on her chest. Germaine thought of that performance when she watched Natalie proudly pushing her little budding breasts up and out at the end of every dismount.

"Hi mommy," Natalie said, in her perky little voice.

"Did you finish your homework?" Germaine knew that Eric would ask her again if Natalie had finished it. He always held her responsible for Natalie's actions.

"I only have math. I'm going to be out of school for a week. I can do it

on the plane.”

“Oh no. You get your book. Let’s get going. It’s late.”

“I’m just going to take a quick shower.”

“Hurry.”

Eric came in and sat next to Germaine thigh to thigh. He held her hand, his arm bent between her legs, his elbow burrowing a bit into her crotch. “Is Natalie off to bed?” He wore a sweet expression.

“She has math to do, and she wants to shower first.”

“You know, if she’d do her work before going to the gym we could relax, go to bed early.”

“You need to talk to her about it, not me.” Germaine pulled her hand away from his hand, scratched the back of her head and gave Eric a challenging look.

“I will, but I’m not home in time to enforce it.” He backed away and leaned against the love seat, folding his arms.

“You could ask to see her work when you get home and if she hasn’t done it, don’t let her go to the gym the following night.”

“I wouldn’t be here to enforce that either. Besides, she can’t miss a workout.”

“Why not? And why would you think that I’d drive her to the gym if you had told her not to go?”

“I don’t want to start anything now, that’s for sure. But all of this could be eliminated if you would just have her do her homework right after school.”

“What makes you think that I can make her do anything? I’d tell her to

do it and if she didn't, I wouldn't take her to the gym. Period. But instead she dawdles knowing that she'll be carted off promptly. If you can handle this better let me see you get her to finish her work tonight." Germaine got up and straightened out the leather pillow. She smoothed her hand across the cool leather and stopped abruptly before she came to the back of his neck.

"No problem." He got up and faced the hall. "Natalie, Natalie. Come on it's time to do your homework." There was no answer. The shower was not running.

"She probably has sneaked off to bed." Germaine raised her shoulders and shook her head.

"Oh, no she doesn't." Eric headed for her room. Shortly they emerged from the hall. Natalie was in the front, clutching her math book and a binder to her chest, trying to look as though she had been in bed for hours. "To the kitchen where I can keep an eye on you."

"Daddy, I'm tired. I can do it on the plane," she whined.

Later when Germaine went into the kitchen, the newspaper was spread across the table; Natalie was sitting opposite the paper. She had her head on the book and was staring at the paper. Eric was standing at the counter making a cup of cappuccino. He was wearing gray sweatpants and a nubby knit cowl neck sweater with three quarter length sleeves. The sweater was of that unisex design that on most men would make one think that the man was wearing his wife's clothes out of desperation, but it looked chic on Eric. The sleeves highlighted his silver bracelet. His dark hair was perfectly trimmed, and his close cut salt and pepper beard made him look like an artist. He moved quickly around the steam arm as if he were sculpting. Even the

arches and curves of his bare feet were attractive.

Germaine knew that he would make some excuse for Natalie. He would explain his ineffectualness in a way that made Germaine feel responsible for Natalie. She wouldn't risk frustration. She walked up behind Eric and hugged him. "Can we go to bed soon?" She felt a surge of dominance by having the power to let Eric off the hook, and she took pleasure in the fact that he had failed to control Natalie. For Eric was such an accomplished man. When Germaine announced her marriage plans to her mother the first thing she said about Eric was that he "Does everything well. He's a gift."

On their second date Germaine invited Eric to her apartment. She told him to expect a simple fare; afterall, she did cook all week for a living and it was nice to have a Saturday off, normally her busiest day. Despite her claim, she rose early to begin the elaborate process of making a complicated meal look carefree and elegant. She chilled ribbons of white chocolate to mold around the peach tort. The tablecloth was ironed stiff and flared over her grandmother's round kitchen table. Crystal wine and liquor glasses were unpacked--she hadn't used them since her move. Ginger was peeled and grated. By the time Eric rang the doorbell, the wine was open and breathing and Germaine smelled of a mixture of freshly shampooed hair and aromatic vegetables.

Eric held a flower arrangement; she had already bought one. His arrangement was dramatic and as he said, "Chosen for its sensual aroma." Hers had a country cutesy look complete in a wicker basket. She used his. He

forged ahead into the kitchen, she trailing him. "This can't be a simple fare," he proclaimed. "I recognize the aroma of a complicated blend of ingredients."

"I'll admit it. It's not at all simple." Germaine hoped that Eric recognized the same blend in her.

Over dinner he seemed genuinely thrilled about the meal and enamored with her. As they polished off the bottle of wine, Germaine felt satisfied, pleased, appreciated. Then Eric asked, "Have you ever substituted Asiago for Parmesan cheese?" It surely was an innocent question probably meant to open conversation, and turn it toward her interests, her expertise. But she hadn't tried the cheese. She didn't know where it was sold. At the time, she felt a bit caught off guard, maybe a bit threatened. But his expression didn't betray any motive other than interest in food and in her.

When she talked of this date to her mother she bragged how Eric was knowledgeable on so many subjects. "He knows food, music, theater, politics, cars, finances. . ."

Over the phone, her mother always felt free to interrupt Germaine. "Maybe he's not perfect. Maybe this is infatuation. Just maybe you'll find out he's not perfect. Even if he does know everything, what will that do to you?"

As the years went by, Germaine sought analysis. With the help of her psychologist, Dr. Cavitch, she identified Eric's mention of Asiago cheese as the first crack in the thin ice that supported her ego.

When they were preparing for bed, Eric made a half-hearted attempt at being romantic. He had the sheets pulled just to his waist with his bare chest showing when Germaine emerged from the bathroom. "Come here," he

said, opening his arms.

He looked paler against the gray sheets and gray walls. He had wanted the whole room done in a neutral color. It struck Germaine that possibly he'd look better in peach. Germaine had an urge to say to him, 'you must be kidding,' but she wanted to play it out and see what he was up to. It was unheard of for him to bother with sex on a week night.

He opened the sheet for her to get under. He pulled her close and kissed her, moving his hands slowly down her back. His movements were probably meant to represent playfulness but the movement was more like trepidation. He slowly moved his hand between her arm and ribcage inching toward her breast. Germaine moved her hand down his belly, but after fondling and kissing long enough to make her face burn from his whiskers, she pulled away gently and announced that she was tired. He had not become erect. He would later say that she had rejected him.

When barges passed on the waterway they flashed their searchlights. None of the windows in the house had window coverings. Eric's argument against curtains made sense at first, before they knew about the traffic on the water. "Who can see in?" he asked. "And why stop yourself from seeing out?" A searchlight beamed across the room. It flicked up to the edge of the house. It traveled across the swamp. Germaine lay still while her eyes followed the light until it guided her thoughts down the waterway. She saw her father's face in the water. She heard him say, "You're not the happy little girl. . ." And the water covered his mouth.

She turned to Eric and called him softly. He rolled onto his side and the snoring stopped.

Chapter Three

Grace

Grace had fallen under an unusually heavy slumber. It was the first time she had slept an entire night since Hank's death five months before. When she woke she tried not to hear the deadly quiet. Instead she tried to hold onto fragments of a dream: an image of a newborn baby in a hospital bassinet behind a shattered window. She tried to drift back into the dream to discover more about it, but it was no use. Her bladder was full, and the silence zapped her creative energies. But then, as she sat on the toilet with her head in her hands, she had the eerie feeling that the baby was hers even though there was no resemblance to her. She had an overbearing longing for the baby and a powerful curiosity to know why the glass was shattered.

Before getting back into bed, Grace placed her pink back rest against the headboard and propped a picture of Hank on her knees. She recalled her dreams from earlier in the week. Most of them seemed prompted by events of the day, all meshed together, and turned only mildly grotesque, only mildly distorted. She had read of a man in California who created a room where people could communicate with the dead. She had been dreaming of that room for the last three nights--until this new baby dream. In the room, Hank appeared as a younger man of fifty. Each night as Grace tried to talk to Hank her voice wasn't audible, and Hank looked puzzled. She could understand parts of the dream, but now there was the baby dream. What kind of incubus had her loneliness created?

Despite the fact that five months of such utter loneliness was a long, long time, it also seemed that just yesterday Hank was in the house. Grace

was convinced that all the well-wishers who offered words of comfort were wrong; you couldn't dim forty-eight years. It would always seem like he was just there. Every morning upon waking Grace felt as though she were on an extended vacation, waking in a strange room day after day. Where was she? Where was Hank?

Grace wouldn't talk to Germaine about her loneliness, her dreams. When Germaine called each evening, just after the rates changed, Grace would talk about the weather, the specials at the supermarket, her soap operas, or the news. Last night she went on and on about a mass murder in a fast food restaurant in Idaho. Although she had never been to Idaho, it was one of those in-your-own-back-yard murders. She told Germaine, "I'm glad your father didn't live to see this one. Twenty-three people dead in a small, peaceful town." But these were just words to keep from talking; of course she wished that Hank had lived.

She wanted to tell Germaine how she needed Hank back. She wanted to tell her how she believed that a woman couldn't live without a man. She wanted to tell her that there wasn't one moment of her life when she hadn't known this at her very core. But Germaine would only say that that kind of thinking wasn't productive for her situation. How could Germaine pretend to know her situation?

Grace had married Hank three months following her graduation from high school. After the small ceremony, Hank drove to her parents house to pick up her things. He walked sheepishly into her bedroom to help her with four small boxes and a trunk. Grace remembered seeing herself and Hank in her vanity mirror. She had a huge white corsage on the lapel of her suit

jacket which barely balanced out the huge shoulder pads. She wore her first pair of heels and looked stork-legged. Hank's small, boyish frame was swallowed by his borrowed suit, hiding all traces of the jaunty boy she had dated. His face flushed with embarrassment. The clarity of that childhood image of forty-eight years ago seemed as only yesterday. When that image came to mind she lost herself. It felt exactly the same as it did when she remembered it the day after her marriage or three years after that. How could Germaine, who felt the weight of fourteen years of marriage, understand the weightlessness of her forty-eight?

Even people who had earned the right to empathize with her couldn't. All the widows who came out-of-the-woodwork didn't really know her situation. They all said that things would be the hardest when Germaine and her family left after the funeral. They said that the excitement of the funeral arrangements and of having house guests kept her thoughts away from her loss. But Grace was relieved when Germaine left. She dropped Germaine and her family off at the airport and drove away while they were still at the curb. Eric and Germaine stood waving in unison while Natalie was halfway in the terminal. At least there was an honesty in Natalie.

On the way home she began cataloging all the tasks they had kept her from doing. Maybe other women wanted to cling to their daughters at a time like this. But then maybe they had different daughters, different sons-in-law. Her son-in-law, with his too suave manner, acted as though she were incapable of understanding her own future. He insisted on nosing into her finances as if she would take a hand-out from him. And self-centered Germaine, on the day of the funeral, mentioned three or four times that black

wasn't her color.

Her impatience over wanting Germaine to leave reminded her of the days when she impatiently waited for Germaine's bedtime. In those days, she loved the silence of a house with a sleeping child. Hank would tip-toe around and even lower the volume on the TV. When bedtime came for Grace and Hank they would always go together, up the stairs, Hank following Grace. In those days their room was their sanctuary; and, unlike some other couples, they would never let their daughter in. If Germaine woke before them, she knew to wait quietly in her room until they were in the kitchen.

Later, when Grace and Hank slept separately, Hank would wait to hear Grace in the kitchen before he invaded her morning. Grace had felt that separate rooms improved their marriage--she would look fresh and have her make-up on before she greeted him--but now she would give anything to spend one night with him--anything. Why hadn't she thought of this before?

They never talked of their deaths. In many ways Grace had feared that their everyday life would go on forever. How could she want it back so much? My god, they were old and retired, why hadn't they planned for their deaths? There were so many things he needed to tell her. Didn't he have a life insurance policy with the VA? Where did he keep the drill? How do you fill the windshield washers? What did he want her to do with his clothes? Yesterday as she was thinking about how much she needed to talk to him, she absentmindedly set the table for both of them. She was thinking about him being dead and still she was incapable of really living it.

Grace spent this day as most, going about her chores. She knew that in

many ways she was going through her days as though Hank were still there. All the daily chores went smoothly, but mealtimes were difficult. She longed to tell him about new developments in her soap operas. She had never known if Hank enjoyed her reports, but he seemed to listen. And once in a while he would ask about a specific character. Even when she was irritated that Hank may have been patronizing her, she still loved talking to him about the complicated lives of soap opera characters. Often they reflected a mood or theme from their own lives--from their young life.

Grace had been watching As the World Turns since before Germaine was born. She used to sit in the living room and watch it following Germaine's return to school after lunch. When Germaine left home, and Grace had more time, she began spending a long lunch with her soap opera. Today she ate at the kitchen table as the portable TV flickered away on its stand next to her. She ate a tuna fish salad sandwich and a handful of fat-free potato chips. When the door bell rang she was more irritated that it was interrupting her program than her lunch.

Helen stood in a sixties' style car-coat and bright blue leggings. Her hair looked newly cut in the style that was once known as a pixie; her lips and cheeks were colored bright red. She had a pineapple in her hand. "These were just flown in from Hawaii." She smiled. The red lipstick emphasized tobacco-stained teeth--a reminder of an old habit, an old life.

"How nice." For an instant Grace pictured a plane full of pineapples setting down in Helen's yard. Grace stood impassively straining to hear the next line of the handsome dark-haired bad boy character she thought at least physically resembled Hank when he was in his twenties.

"I bought it for you. When I eat them I imagine I'm in Hawaii." Helen held it out, its spiky top an extension of Helen's hairdo.

"How nice. Hank and I never went to Hawaii, but I'll pretend." Grace took it and turned to hear the program break for a commercial. She unwittingly huffed out an exhalation of breath that betrayed her disappointment.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, no. I was just at a point in my show--you know a turning point--and well now . . . I've missed it."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry. You were watching TV and now I've interrupted. Why didn't you say something?"

"Never mind. I'll catch up tomorrow." Grace profoundly felt the loss of that one line. What had he said? How would that sentence change the whole course of the story? Even if she heard the line, she could never get it back to fit in the moment. "Did you want to come in?" This was the third time in a week Helen had dropped by. She was being a friend, yet Grace felt challenged by Helen's new social life. Helen tried too hard to convince Grace that she was enjoying her widowhood. It seemed as though she were in some kind of automatic mode, as though she had handed her life over to a higher power, a power that exorcised the spirit of the dead and left a light hearted gaiety.

Helen bent over to take off her boots.

"Helen, leave them on. The snow's clean."

"They slip right off. It's a habit." Helen looked up red faced. At this angle the pixie cut betrayed the sparseness of her hair, her age. She headed

straight for the kitchen and sat in front of the TV. "You know, I stopped watching the soaps when Sal died." Helen looked up and down the set as if scrutinizing a new neighbor. "They just brought back too many memories to continue. Do you find that you give things up that bring back memories?"

"I'm not hiding from my memories, Helen. I don't want to simply forget a man I spent my whole life with."

"Of course not. That's not what I meant. I don't want to forget Sal, but I want to forget the pain of his death."

Grace reached behind Helen and turned off the TV. She could smell Helen's perfume. She couldn't help but wondering who the perfume was for. She set the pineapple in the center of the table where it would remain as a center piece; she didn't know how to cut a pineapple.

Helen pulled her foot up under her other leg and sat as only someone thirty years younger would think proper. "All my years with Sal added up to a lifetime--to a lifelong marriage. But there are new facets of my life . . . I haven't died, yet. I know how it might seem. I'm doing things that I did as a girl, and I love every minute of it. Is it better to make myself unhappy?" Helen stretched her neck; opened her eyes wide before returning to her speech. "As you may know, I go dancing every Friday night. There's nothing wrong with that. It's life, community. We even raise money. We've been doing ballroom dancing down at the Golden Eagle Senior Center for seven months now. You'd really enjoy it, Grace."

"Hank and I haven't danced in years." Neither of them would consider going to a dance, it wasn't in their repertoire of going-out-things-to-do, which consisted almost exclusively of dining, but they would dance at

weddings and anniversaries.

"I figured as much. But they have lessons. Most of the men know the steps and are easy to follow. And, of course, you don't have to dance. I didn't at first." Helen paused and looked around the room as if for inspiration. "I don't have anyone to go with Friday night. Can you go?" Helen looked eager to do more coaxing.

"What time?" Grace didn't mean to accept the offer, but she could tell by the expression on Helen's face that she felt it was confirmed. "Eight o'clock. We'll come home whenever you're ready."

Grace believed that she'd call Helen later on in the week to cancel. She pushed herself from the table and stood. She pushed the chair in hoping that Helen would follow her lead. "Should I dress up?"

Helen got up slowly. Her knee seemed to take a minute to adjust to standing. "A party dress or work-type clothes. Be sure to wear a skirt that flows."

Grace remained quiet while Helen pulled her boots on. A minute after the door closed the TV was on and the bad boy character promised to change.

Grace found a dress in the cedar closet in the basement. She had worn it when Germaine was little and she and Hank had gone to her godchild's wedding. They danced all night. Grace would have to alter the waistline; it was a little tight. But it was a timeless dress, and in perfect condition. Possibly it was a bit pre-season. After all it was only March third and snow still blanketed their earth, and the dress had sheer chiffon sleeves. But she had an evening shawl that she would carry with her shoes in a petite carrying

case, so she would surely be warm. Besides, she was just plain too old to care about seasonal dressing rules.

Grace stood behind the front door and peered out the small hexagonal window. She watched as the headlights of Helen's new Honda Accord beamed up the drive. Grace tried to understand Helen's new taste in cars. Helen and Sal had always owned Pontiacs. They had a new one when Sal passed. Even Hank, who rarely talked about other people's taste, had said that this new car had odd lines and that Sal would be shocked.

Helen gave a short beep of the horn, and Grace flicked the outside light off and on. She opened the hall door to expose its full length mirror. She watched herself put on her mink coat. She turned her body and twisted her head to check her hem. She stopped and lifted the dress just a bit in back; she was still proud of her legs. Hank had always said, "Men love a good set of gams." And she still had her thin, shapely calves. She turned back to face the mirror and patted her thick gray hair.

She put her hands in the pockets of her three quarter length coat as she headed out bracing herself against the cold rush of air. She led with her hair--pumped stiff with Paul Mitchell's *Freeze and Shine Super Spray*, a Christmas gift from Racine her hairdresser. She leaned hard, her head pushing into the night as if a shield against the cold, the night, the outside world. This was her first evening venture out since she lost Hank.

"You look beautiful," Helen said.

"You don't have to flatter me. I'm not your date." The car was heavy with perfume and the dry warmth of a preheated car.

"If I'm not your date does this mean you're planning to meet a real one tonight?" Helen slid the gears into reverse and the car crackled down the hard snow packed drive.

"Don't be silly. I'm just getting out. I'm not interested. Hank is barely dead."

"What can I set the temperature on?" Helen asked, seeming to gloat over her modern car.

"Keep it cool."

Fridley, Minnesota, sprawled out along the Mississippi River with the other northeastern suburbs of Minneapolis. These suburbs were carved out of flat treeless farmland, and still lacked the feel of the wealthier more mature neighborhoods. Pockets and tracks of land still reflected the poor planning of the opportunistic builders of the late fifties and early sixties. Despite the opportunity that thirty to forty years bring for change, many of the developments still harbored homes that looked exactly like one another. The shopping centers had remained strip-like, never adopting the facade that gave other communities a quaint, stylish appearance. Instead these suburbs flaunted their blue-collar roots and never pretended to be more than neat and functional.

The Seniors' Center was new. The group that ran and funded the Center was above the medium income range for the area and not afraid to be active with its money. Although the center had a basic hall look, the gardens set it off. They drove around the back and Helen pointed out an observatory, and a Japanese style garden that could only be imagined through the darkness

and the snow. They parked by a side door. The snaking walk was tastefully dimly lit along the path.

Helen leaned close to Grace and whispered to her as a teenager would giggle out her excitement. "They've got a good DJ tonight."

"Is that so?" Grace pulled her mink close. "What does that mean?"

"We hire a guy to play the records and talk between sets. Stanley. He was a real radio DJ before he retired. Maybe you remember him from WCCO?" She pulled back from Grace and looked.

Grace only shrugged and shook her head.

"Well he's very handsome and really professional. You'll like him."

They were greeted by a couple standing behind a table with a cash box. Behind them, the hall looked empty and dark. A mirrored ball rotated slowly and the music was slow and seemed undanceable.

"We're just warming up, Helen," the woman said. "Perfect timing." She smiled and laughed in a high tither that seemed like forced happiness.

"This is my friend Grace." Helen looked at Grace as if she had brought in her catch of the day.

"Your first time here?" the man asked as if knowing it was. "Well, so pleased you could join us." The man extended his hand. "We have a strong organization here. I think you'll be impressed," he said.

Once inside, Grace saw that the people were grouped in another room partitioned off from the dance hall by a long buffet table. People were mingling, resting and balancing drinks and paper plates full of finger foods.

A man was at the end of the table dressed in a tux. The man was staring at Grace until she moved to get out of his line of sight.

The man circled around the crowd and headed for her.

"You're new." Grace could smell a hint of liquor. "I'm Rudy. It's my unofficial duty to welcome newcomers."

"No, it's not." Helen appeared from behind Grace. "You watch out for him," she said as she moved up the food line.

"Nice to meet you, my name is Grace Knutsen." She extended her hand to find that his was damp and powerful.

Grace had not remembered being susceptible to foolish romantic situations. And she would never resort to explaining away an interlude at a Seniors' Center by acknowledging that she was lonely, needy. In fact, she wouldn't explain or analyze one moment of the evening: she was under an hypnotic spell. All she would remember of the evening was whirling around the dance floor doing the waltz--the real waltz. He held her hand high, supported her back, whirled his legs between the folds of chiffon. She arched and twisted and turned her head from side to side with each new stanza of the three quarter measures--the way she had only experienced by watching TV. How did she even know to do this? It was magic.

When she and Helen sat in the car at the end of the evening, Rudy leaned his body close to the window and frantically wrote down her number and then folded the paper pocket size slipping it inside his tuxedo jacket.

"Good night."

"Good night." Finger tips touched before the car slid around the gardens.

Grace picked up the phone on the second ring knowing it was Rudy.

"Just wanted to say Good night again."

"That's sweet but it's really late."

"It's not quite midnight, you can't be a pumpkin yet."

"Thank you, but I'm just putting out the lights."

"Just one thing. We danced so much tonight I didn't have the chance to say anything, but I must. When I saw you across the room I was truly taken aback. I was simply whisked back thirty years. You have that timeless look. You're beautiful, charming, and a superb dancer."

"No, no. That's enough. At least the dancing was all you. I accept and appreciate your other comments. I'll talk to you sometime at a decent hour. Good night." She hung up without giving him a chance to respond. She folded the picture into the letter that was on her lap, and put it back in its box. She pulled the pink back-rest pillow from behind her head and placed it against the wall on the floor. She turned out the light. Tomorrow she would put the box back on the shelf in the garage.

Chapter Four

Germaine

Much of this time of year seemed painful. The azaleas had already bloomed, their fading petals heaped in little piles beneath each bush; in a frenzy of nesting, bird eggs fell to the ground to crack and dry in the sun; the cool winter days gave way to ever warmer ones and each day resumed its summer mugginess; the wind shifted and blew in the pungent odors of the paper mills that lay to the north of town; and the snakes came out, circling the edge of the swamp, inching closer toward the house.

After Natalie was off to school, Germaine spent her early morning standing at the kitchen window, her eyes trained at the edge of the swamp searching for the gaping mouth of a water moccasin. Eventually her eyes settled upon the water. The Intracoastal's steady southward flow carried her mind with it and she relinquished her thoughts to the hypnotic effect of her glare. This would prompt her mind to float back into the dream of the previous night. She recaptured the dream in its unadulterated form. The form of pure images devoid of interpretation.

Germaine enjoyed reliving the dream for this seemed to contradict her trained analytical self. For a brief moment the images were the truth. This was in direct contrast to the advice of Dr. Cavitch, who encouraged her to write down her dreams upon waking, and once recorded to read her entry looking for clues--clues that were there to let her know things about herself.

At first she resisted writing them down. She believed she could remember them sufficiently. Plus it was inconvenient, disruptive to turn on the light and start writing with Eric sharing the bed. She wouldn't consider

telling Eric that she was logging dreams. Not only would he not see the value of this exercise; but also, it was important to reserve parts of her life as separate from her husband. But regardless of her initial resistance, the memories of her dreams became unusually intense, and she believed that this intensity was an internal message telling her to pay attention. It was then that she invested in the Itty Bitty Night Light which she clamped on her journal allowing Eric to sleep right through her scribbling. After a week of entries, Germaine saw new aspects of her subconscious.

Standing at the window today, the dream that slipped back to her was a dream of her father carrying her on his shoulders. She pulled her father's hair and told him to go faster and faster. He ran and ran and ran endlessly across a field from her childhood, the field that had stretched behind their house before their housing development was completed. And then her father feigned a fall as he used to do. Both of them tumbled over and over down a gentle slope. Germaine remembered her stomach turning and giving her that momentary roller coaster feel of excitement. She began to giggle.

Her father said, "Boy, you did it to me that time." He too was laughing. But then, at the bottom of the hill, he didn't get up.

This dream, this image of her father lying still, completely motionless at the bottom of the hill, seemed so eternal that she believed it to be etched to her senses. She felt unable to move past it. It was only a vague sense of time that finally pulled her out of it, as a hand swiping her from a sort of quicksand situation just in the nick of time. And then, before she could look at the clock, she felt panic.

Was she late for her appointment with Dr. Cavitch? No, it still must be

early. As she focused upon her reflection in the kitchen window, her desperate expression shocked her. She could see her chest heaving. Get control. . . "Calm down," she began to mouth her words. "What did I do to my father? What did I think I did?" She mouthed, "I didn't do anything." She could see her breathing slow. She watched her mouth carefully as she moved her lips deliberately enough to lip-sync. "I did nothing to facilitate my father's death. I've done nothing to warrant any guilt."

Of course guilt wasn't an unnatural reaction to grief. Dr. Cavitch would tell her it was just another emotion that would surface to help mask and thus alleviate some of the pain. And then Dr. Cavitch would tell her not to over interpret her dreams. After long sessions extrapolating every possible meaning of every nuance of a dream he would say, "There is a danger in over interpreting, you know."

This was the disclaimer she waited for. She loved the idea that most of her therapy sessions left her with a sense of irony, and deep ambivalence. She would drive home reveling in the idea that the Doctor couldn't guide her after all. Even though this was a no-answer exercise, it gave a boost to her ego. Germaine loved to clarify the ambiguous nature of life. To her, accepting that the foundation of her emotions and her reasoning capacity was amorphous somehow led her to the ability to pull out a firm stance and live with it. For instance, despite all the little demons that ran through her subconscious and challenged her, she knew that she was not in any way responsible for her father's death and that was that. She accepted that the dreams and the flashbacks of her father were the minutiae that rested beneath the concrete substance of her life, and only at times were they the truth. And

truth wasn't necessarily reality.

Dr. Cavitch's office was located in a small house on Riverside Avenue. It was an older, boxy house that abutted the lot of a deserted mansion. Germaine parked on a side street to minimize the chance of her Lexus getting sideswiped on the busy avenue. The mansion was on the corner. As she passed it and its bramble barrier of overgrown vines, she thought she would use this image as a metaphor for her state of mind. Lately the Doctor enjoyed working with metaphors.

The doctor had recently glassed in the front portico. He hadn't mentioned whether or not he was pleased with this addition, but Germaine figured that he must have been sorry since the room was always stifling. He had added two wicker love seats, of the quality found in Pier One Imports, and a coffee table strewn with magazines. The reception desk was just inside the original structure. Its registration window opened up to the sunroom. When she signed in, the cold air from the air conditioned office assaulted her face.

To avoid the heat, and then the transition to air conditioning, Germaine began sitting in her car and would only head for the office when she saw the previous client walking down the steps to the sidewalk. For the last three weeks it had been the same woman, a sharp looking, tall redhead, dressed in a power suit. Germaine wondered if the redhead noticed her comings and goings. It seemed dangerous that after almost a year of weekly sessions she had yet to tell Eric. She worried that they would run into the Cavitch's at the symphony or dining out. Despite this worry, Germaine

secretly wished that the tall, redheaded woman were spying on her, working for Eric, and that he would confront her with his findings.

The office had once been a single family residence, someone's home. But the entire house had been gutted to accommodate the office. It was hard to imagine that there had once been a living room, kitchen, bedrooms, a family living there. The only obvious signs left of the old structure were the fireplace, and a built-in buffet. The woodwork had been stained dark and all the walls painted a cobalt blue. It didn't seem a very arresting color appropriate for wrenching confessions.

The little therapy room had a double door, meaning that there was a door inside another door similar to the set up of a screen door and a storm door, except that both of these doors were matching interior-type doors. Outside the room was a small deck off a sliding glass door. The deck spilled onto an equally small garden with tall wild flowers, a bird bath, and a matching sundial. Around the garden was a wall tall enough that no one could see in or out. The couch was situated so that Germaine had to turn to the right in order to look outside. Her line-of-vision was directed at the doctor's chair which was pulled out from his desk to his right.

Dr. Cavitch was well into his fifties. His hair was completely gray. A consummate marathon runner, he was too thin and his clothes too loose and casual. He had small brown eyes set beneath heavy brows that grew out and down toward his nose. Yet, despite the oddities of his appearance, it all hung together somehow and he had charm and a dash of handsomeness.

"You're looking more rested," he began.

"I always sleep well."

"Yes, but I think that you'd agree there is a difference between sleeping and really resting." He chuckled.

"I'd have to think about it." Germaine knew that he knew she was purposely being surly. While others might see this as her defense mechanism, she believed that he believed it was her way of flirting--which it was.

"OK, you give it some thought. Anyway, you look good." He sat on the swivel-back leather chair. It was honey-colored and beginning to show the dirt, the outline of his body. "Can you take a compliment Germaine?" He smiled and suddenly Germaine realized that it was the brightness of his smile, the way his face folded happily up, that made him so appealing.

"Yes and thank you, but one is always suspicious when paying for someone's time."

"How do I make you suspicious?" He rolled his chair back on the clear hard plastic runner.

"Everyone makes me suspicious. But then I guess that makes me sound paranoid."

"Well, would you say that you're feeling paranoid? Would you say that this is a new feeling? Or do you feel that there are ulterior motives behind compliments?"

"I certainly have fleeting paranoid thought, but I don't believe that I'm paranoid. I've always been suspicious of compliments."

"That's not unusual. We're trained to be wary of compliments. John Steinbeck described Doc Ricketts as being truly remarkable because he could accept a compliment."

"Yeah? And how do you know that?"

"I read it. Steinbeck wrote it in The Sea of Cortez."

"OK, to honor Doc Ricketts I'll work on accepting compliments."

Germaine hated when Cavitch brought up his little tidbits of knowledge. But he had to buttress his ego and come off as the one with the answers. Over the year she had worked to believe that he was only her guide and that she had her own answers. But something lately led her to believe that this role was changing. She believed that his new focus, the way in which he forced their conversation instead of leading it, had a feeling of closure. She suspected that their work together was coming to an end. And he was sending her this message as if to say, we've taken this as far as it can go.

He cleared his throat, and added a brief "ah hum" and then he led her where he wanted to go. "We left off last week with you talking about a trip you took to the cabin with your father. A vision. We've also spent a number of weeks on your dreams, which I believe have helped you make some breakthroughs. But today I think it's important that we go back to your home life."

Germaine crossed her legs. On the way over she had prepared herself to talk about her relationship with her parents and their relationship with each other. Now she was unbalanced. She did not want to shift gears.

"Everything is pretty much the same."

"The last time you talked about Eric you felt that he was unemotional. You worried that he wasn't expressing any grief at all. You said that he had shut down emotionally and was burying himself further and further in his work. Has there been any change?"

"No."

"Can you expand on that? Does he seem sympathetic, empathetic? Is he grieving?" The doctor put his note pad on the desk to his right and rolled his chair forward putting his elbows on his knees, leaning close to Germaine.

"I'm sure he's grieving." Germaine ran her fingers through her hair, changing the part. She uncrossed her legs and put her thighs tightly together. She smoothed her thin cotton sundress over her thighs. She became acutely aware of the fact that in the morning when she chose this dress from her closet she wanted it to show off her figure. She felt that Cavitch was looking at her thin arms, her long neck, the hint of cleavage. She felt his eyes drop from hers; surely her thin muscled body was the type that an athlete like himself would notice.

"Yes?" He pushed back and picked up his pad and pencil.

"Yes? . . . Well. . . We haven't talked about it specifically."

"What have you talked about?"

"We talk about his work. We talk about the events of Natalie's day. We talk about how my mother's doing." Germaine felt a chill and wished that she had brought a sweater, or worn a different dress.

"Germaine, you need to talk to him about your feelings and his. Both of you need to express your feelings. That's how you maintain an honest relationship. Let's try this: think of me as Eric, and you tell me what you'd like to say."

She slumped deeply into the couch. "This is not easy. When I think about what I'd like to say, I feel demanding. "

"What are your demands?"

"I wish that he wouldn't dominate our time together complaining about his job. He always says he loves his job, his job is his life, but by the end of the week he expresses the pressures of his job in a tirade."

"Your complaint sounds legitimate. How could you express it so that you're not complaining and so that it won't lead him to clam up all together. Of course you want him to share his frustrations, but not to focus on them."

Germaine did not want to start role playing. She knew that Cavitch wanted her to repeat his words, to incorporate them into their pretend dialogue. He hoped that she would say, "Even though I want you to share your frustrations, I wish you wouldn't focus on them." But she wasn't going to be trapped into this game. This whole scene seemed ironic to her because lately she had come to the conclusion that the type of behavior the Doctor was trying to sell her on adopting was part of her problem. She was tired of manipulating Eric's behavior. Manipulation was what it was. It wasn't control, or effective communication. It was manipulation.

It was the part of motherhood she despised. Just last week her hairdresser had told her, in great detail, how she had enrolled her daughter in dressage lessons strictly for something to dangle in front of her. She used those lessons every night to get her daughter to do her homework. She claimed that her daughter did her homework or no dressage, simple as that. What could be the harm in using such a technique, everyone benefited?

Germaine wondered why people felt that threatening children was so original, and such a panacea? Germaine had played these games, had felt that she mastered Natalie's behavior for years, but it only led Germaine to carry too much responsibility for her daughter's work, and led to Natalie lying.

Listening to her hairdresser's report of her mastery over her daughter's will forced Germaine into a new assessment of these techniques of manipulation. She had often thought of her hairdresser as silly, giggly, too open and familiar with her customers. She never took her seriously. And then she saw the two of them in a sisterhood of cajoling, conniving, and keeping the peace in their families. She wondered why both Cavitch and Eric tried to force her into this role.

"Did I say something to trouble you?"

"I don't know. I don't want to go on with this. I don't want to stay on this track."

"OK, but do you think you can tell me why?"

"This is not the role that I want to be in," she began, surprising herself. "I've given up my values to please other people, and I'm sick of it."

"You're being very hard on yourself."

"Maybe I'm feeling sorry for myself."

"We all have those feeling. What role do you want?"

"I can't explain it, but when I was home for the funeral my mother said something that made me feel she had been living a lie."

"What was that?" he asked, and started to pull his watch from his pocket. It was a wristwatch, the sports type with a black plastic band. Germaine figured that he kept it in his pocket to emphasize that the end of the session was nearing. He would begin to glance at the watch when there was about ten minutes remaining.

"I can't put my finger on it. But part of my father's death, for me, is thinking about my death, or Eric's. And boy I'd hate to think that it would

end up here. It feels like a lie.”

“This is all new and quite unexpected information. I’ve never heard you talk along these lines before. This feels like a breakthrough. Our time is coming to an end, but let me suggest that we work in an appointment early next week. Would that work for you?”

“Well . . . I could phone, once I have time to look over my calendar.”

“Very well. Just one thing I will ask you to try to do this weekend. Say something to Eric about your grief, or about the dissatisfaction with your communication.” He took one last look at his watch and stood up as a gracious host.

Germaine planned to talk to Eric over dinner that evening. Their dinner started off pleasantly enough, and Germaine felt relaxed. Thoughtfully, Eric had stopped for her favorite Cabernet--it was Friday night. He helped saute vegetables and grill the salmon steaks. And while they sat over their elegant meal, he told her about the successful abdominal surgery he had performed; it had turned into a long case, a challenging abscess. He told her about bailing out one of his colleagues after she had mistakenly transected an artery--a common error--one from which he, luckily, was able to salvage the patient from. Of course they would let the patient know about the error. A doctor who admits his mistake is less culpable, in the eyes of a jury, than one who tries to hide it. Yes, Germaine did understand the malpractice minefield that doctors were exposed to everyday in their quest to deliver quality medical care, the best in the world. And she also understood that now they not only had the blood thirsty lawyers and the world’s most litigious

society breathing down their necks, but also the likes of Hillary Clinton and cost effective medicine. Nope, the public was not going to be happy. Not one bit. And who would they blame? Well, the doctors, as always. Yes, Germaine understood all of this, and had no time to express anything else.

After their meal, Germaine drove to pick up Natalie. Eric wanted to finish his dictations so that the rest of his weekend would be free. Natalie had a gymnastic meet just south of Tampa and the three of them would go together. It was the first meet of the season and the first one Eric had attended in a year. Germaine believed it was his attempt at being with them more. She gave him credit for that; he had a difficult schedule to juggle.

The gym was housed in a huge quonset hut. It was always bright and unpleasant to the eyes when entering from the dark outside. Germaine squinted and scanned the gym for Natalie. Two of the other girls in Natalie's age group were talking to the boys. Germaine caught sight of Natalie doing her balance beam routine over in the corner. Natalie waved and immediately jumped down.

Natalie's warm little body fogged the windows of the car and Germaine pulled off the road to let them clear. The moon was full and it highlighted a grotesque outline of Natalie's face. Her hair was pulled back in a severe ponytail. Her impish little shape disappeared under what appeared to be an enormous pumpkin-sized head. What Germaine saw before her was a little girl who was putting too much stock in her ability to twirl around the uneven parallel bars. A girl who needed to develop a personality, some savvy. She would be a woman of the twenty-first century. More than likely she would need to maintain a job, and a marriage.

Germaine wanted to convey her concerns. She wanted to pass on to her daughter the need to be more than cute and bouncy. Germaine remembered her mother wanting nothing more for her than to be neat and organized. Natalie would need more. She wanted Natalie to have a sense of her own identity. Germaine conjured up her I'm-a-sweet-concerned-mother's voice and asked, "Do you ever talk to any of the boys at the gym, sweetheart?" She was surprised to be focused on Natalie's popularity, but Natalie always seemed excluded from groups.

"Of course, mommy. Why?"

"It just dawned on me, that I've never seen you talking to a boy. Usually you're by yourself. When I was your age, I had girlfriends and boyfriends. I just feel that friends are important."

"Mother, please don't compare my life to yours." Natalie said with an exasperated smack at the end of the sentence.

"Watch your tone, young lady." Germaine snapped. She wasn't sure why she felt so angry, but she felt justified nevertheless. And she had every right to ask Natalie about her life.

"Mommy don't start on me. Don't tell me about how you used to do things." Natalie turned the ghoulish-looking shadow of her face toward her mother. "P l e a s e." Her braces glinted as she let out a whiny nasal voice that Germaine detested. "P l e a s e?"

"Where do you get that tone of voice?" Germaine could not remember the last time she was harsh with Natalie, but Natalie's voice was so grating and insolent that she couldn't let it go. "Which one of your little friends are you trying to imitate? Well I'll tell you, young lady, maybe other mothers put

up with that whiny voice from their daughters, but I'm not other mothers."

"What's wrong?" Natalie shrieked. "What have I done? Just leave me alone!"

Natalie had never shouted at Germaine before, and Germaine couldn't let this go unheeded. "I hope you're not planning to go to Tampa tomorrow, that's all I can say." Germaine pulled quickly onto the dark highway. She shook her head and muttered, "I hope that this isn't the beginning of trouble from you because I'm not going to stand for it."

Natalie whimpered quietly.

Eric sat at his desk in his home office. As they passed his door, Germaine could see his small recorder held up to his mouth. She heard the drone of his professional voice. Natalie halted at the door. He finished his sentence and asked, "What's wrong sweetie?"

Germaine could hear sounds of commiseration and conspiracy from behind the closed door. When the door opened Natalie yelled out, "I'm packing. See you in the morning Daddy."

Eric approached Germaine as she sat at the table over a cup of coffee. He pulled out the chair and sat right in front of her. "What's up?"

"I was short with her, but I couldn't stand her sassiness. You've been angry over her tone before."

"Yes, of course, but let me remind you that she has an important event tomorrow. And I want you to remember this in the future, we don't play dirty pool with our daughter." He tapped his index finger loudly against the table. His eyes were stiff and furious. "For all her weaknesses, she prepares

seven days a week for gymnastics. Don't forget that." He banged his finger once more. "These events are important. They cost us time and money. Tomorrow I'm spending my one weekend off a month to support her. Do you think for one minute that you could make a unilateral decision that would affect my weekend?" He snapped the finger sharply. "Don't you even think about threatening to take this away from her. Do you understand?"

"Jesus, I don't believe this."

"Well believe it."

"Listen to you. You're telling me what to think. You're lecturing me. You're humiliating me. Don't you think that Natalie is hearing this? I hope she hears me say, I was wrong. I was upset over something else and I took it out on her. I'm embarrassed that I behaved in such a fashion. I believe it's unlike me. But I can't accept the way you're talking to me." Germaine stormed from the room. She turned the corner down the hall to her room and was struck by the idea that it wasn't her room, but theirs. How do you get away from the person you share a bed with?

Germaine dialed her mother's number with a mixture of regret and apprehension. It was unlike Germaine to call her mother in the morning and to burden her with her problems. "How are you doing?"

"I'm getting out a bit. And you?"

"Natalie got first in all the events except balance beam. And even in that she got third. She was great, really great." Germaine heard the excited pitch of her voice echoed back at her through the receiver.

"Oh, honey, that's wonderful," Grace said.

"I'm so happy. I was really nervous Friday night, and I don't know exactly why, but I was really mean to her. Anyway . . . we did talk it over and I think she understands."

"I've been warning you that it's only natural for mothers and daughters to get into it when their daughters become that certain age. We certainly had our differences. And you can't always be in control. It's not natural. It's not good."

"I'm not going to agree with you that it's not good to be in control, but I will forgive myself for my outbreak with her."

"Now that you've forgiven yourself, it's time to prepare for the next outbreak. It will come, Germaine. Remember my words."

"Thanks, Mom. This is very reassuring."

"Come on Germaine, you're not living in a cocoon. Parents have a whole set of problems to deal with when their kids become teenagers."

"Mother I know that. I know that dealing with any family member brings problems. But having problems with teenagers is not a given."

"I'm only asking you to prepare." Grace's voice was firm. After a brief pause, her voice took on a sympathetic lilt. "So what made you call so early?"

"I thought that you'd love to hear about Natalie's meet. And I was feeling a bit guilty that I couldn't call over the weekend." Germaine wasn't quite telling the truth. She could have called. In fact, Natalie had wanted to call her Grandmother Sunday night when they got in, but Germaine had quickly shoed her off to bed. It was a selfish move on Germaine's part, but she had been planning to call her mother as soon as the house was vacant and she could really talk. Several times throughout the weekend, Germaine

believed she'd tell her mother about her new fears. She planned to tell her that her perfect husband was increasingly hard to live with, and that they were becoming distant. But instead she could only defend her position with Natalie. As she sat in her vast kitchen, her angular knees pressed against her body under her thin nightgown, feeling cold to the bone, she thought--who can I talk to? How could I consider burdening my mother, now?

After she ended the conversation, Germaine cleared her mind of any possible lingering effects: She hadn't revealed too much. Sharing her ill-tempered behavior with Natalie was the right thing to do. It certainly had given her mother an opportunity to be an authority. She was glad that she hadn't mentioned her marriage.

She made up her mind that throughout the day, when the unpleasantness of Eric's outburst crept into her mind, she would stop whatever she was doing and call out "Clear." There was no sense in dwelling on this problem. She was aware of what set Eric off and she would avoid these situations. Although it was fair for her to hope to talk more about her feelings, to expect to be more than a sounding board, she would approach her needs cautiously, carefully, and in complete emotional control. She didn't need Dr. Cavitch to guide her in conjugal conversations.

By late morning, Germaine had settled into her chores and a comfortable rhythm eased her. She watered the tall palms that skirted the pool. The pool was completely screened in and it was the only outside area that was bug-free enough to enjoy. Just outside the screen their gardening service had planted bright pink and purple petunias. After reading an article

in Architectural Digest, Eric realized that they needed a splash of color to set off the stark landscaping and muted grays of the house.

Germaine loved this bright oasis. A ruby-throated hummingbird flitted close, its wingbeat vibrating a song. A breeze had come up from the south and the air had a clean, fresh-washed smell, and a pleasant warmth. Germaine let the breeze blow her night gown up revealing her nudity, giving her the sensation of freedom and excitement, an excitement that didn't turn dark with the approach of the black water moccasin that slithered close to the house.

Chapter Five

Grace

Behind the cabinet in the garage Grace found an old beer bottle that must have been Hank's. She grabbed it by the neck and raised it to her lips. She imagined it cold and frosty with the label slipping down from the moisture. It was a Dos Equis, Hank's favorite brand. A few months before his death they had quit serving this brand at their favorite Mexican restaurant. Grace recalled Hank's disappointment when their waiter said, "You got our last Dos Equis, sir. Next week you'll have to order another brand."

"Really? Why is that?" he asked. His eyes showed unwarranted dismay. Grace could remember the intonation of his question, a sad lament. She could remember how the lines settled deep into his face as he watched the waiter returned to the kitchen. "I really like Dos Equis. Every week there is a change, a new item."

Standing in the garage, Grace put her lips near the bottle where Hank had placed his. To her, at that moment, she longed for him the way he had longed to enjoy this brand of beer at the restaurant. "This beer," she said and held the bottle away from her lips to look at it. How could these two losses seem at all similar? She had lost her husband. Her husband. By God, this was only one brand of beer. But there was something in that unlikely comparison that made her come instantaneously to a deep understanding. Her loss was that comprehensive. It was everything, it was losing everything--being with him in the Mexican restaurant, sharing what he felt, having a bottle of Dos Equis in the refrigerator door--it was all gone forever. She put the bottle back to her lips in a desperate attempt for comfort, as a person

would after crossing a wide desert, reckless to regain life. She imagined for one moment that a cool elixir passed through her body, but instead of the cool pleasure she had imagined, the bottle was gritty from months of weathering the dirt and dust in the garage. She took the bottle from her lips and spit onto the floor. She muttered, "If only I could taste your lips again."

Suddenly, standing in the shadows of the dimly lit garage, the car seemed to loom up behind her as a hideous reminder. Its presence weighed heavily on her consciousness. She feared glimpsing at the car and once again seeing Hank's lifeless body. It was a fear that had not surfaced before, for she had had the car professionally cleaned and detailed immediately following Hank's death. And then, using the adage of getting right back on a horse as her guide, she drove the car. She parked it in the garage and moved to the passenger side. Slowly she turned toward the driver's seat. She did it over and over. She forced herself to enter the garage daily and deliberately look at the driver's seat. She believed she had exorcised any possible ghost from the car, yet now it was haunting her.

She moved to her right without turning. She ran her hand across the shelf until she found the empty spot, and then, she deftly slipped the little box back into its place. Hank had been so close to it. She wondered when he had lost his sense of curiosity.

A couple of years after Hank graduated from high school, when Grace was a sophomore, Hank appeared to be the most adventurous man about town. She would see him walking across the Blanden Bridge without a cap or mittens on the coldest below zero days. His hands wouldn't even be stuffed in his pockets. One day she saw him jump onto the running board of his

friend's car and hang on with one hand flying wildly over his head. She had heard from a girl his age that he had questioned a teacher when he was a freshman. He had stood up and asked the teacher to please explain how he had arrived at a certain answer.

Because of his reputation, Grace marveled at his obsequious manner when he called for her. She felt moved beyond expectations when he asked her politely if he could hold her hand. She began to believe that she had powers to tame the savage beast in men. For after their marriage he only showed slight vestiges of his former self, and these vestiges were always shrouded by night or closed doors. For instance, on summer nights they would strip and swim naked in the Nelson's pond. One crazy night he put on her panties and bra and did a strip tease for her. Another time he woke her up in the middle of the night and swore that he saw Martians outside the window.

But then, when he returned from the war, she noticed a complete acquiescence to manners, politeness, and a taciturn disposition. She understood this as a natural maturation, but where had his curiosity gone? Where had that personality gone? Only at times, when lost in play with Germaine, did he return to his old self.

If only Hank would have moved from his beer bottle a mere four feet to the right and taken the box into his hands, maybe everything would have changed. Grace retraced her fingers over the box and moved them slowly across the shelf to where Hank had stashed the beer bottle, and she was surprised by a sudden surge of fear. He had been so close, so close to the possibility of unspeakable passion. So close to fessing up to his passions, to

returning to them.

Grace left the garage by the side door without looking back. The ides of March had come and dumped a foot of snow over newly exposed surfaces left bare after a week of warming. Grace remembered waiting for snow on the day that Hank passed. She didn't focus on the other longings of that day, but she remembered anticipating snow. And now, instead of anticipation, more snow was greeted with defeat--she gave into it, paid to have it shoveled, and prayed for the jonquils to be persistent.

She told Rudy that she wasn't leaving the house until the first jonquil appeared. She thought it was a clever way of buying time without hurting his feelings--making it sound as though she were disappointed with the weather and not him. Over the months the idea that she needed a man haunted her. Whenever she felt desperate, she felt it was the key to her survival. But up until Rudy drove her home and walked her to the front door, she had a strong feeling that she was incapable of spending an evening alone with him. And then, despite the successes of the date, the thought that she shouldn't be with this man gripped her, so she coolly informed him that she would be waiting for nice weather before she accepted another date.

This date only served to heighten her fear of losing the memory of her Hank. In the last few weeks his memory had begun to come back to her in pieces. Last night she imagined his back. She could see it the way it had been the last time she saw him shirtless. It was sometime in the summer when he had finished mowing the lawn. She watched him from the family room window as he pulled his tee shirt up over his head. It was the same back that she had caressed when she was eighteen. The hair around the shoulders was

gray, but it was the same form. How she had longed for his back. How she had longed to smooth her hands up and down its cool skin. How she wanted to wrap her arms tightly around the middle of the back, around his shoulders. But even then, at that moment last summer, that moment when it was still possible, something stopped her.

Helen had invited Grace out for lunch. Helen told her to wear something modern, "chic" she had said. How changed their lives now seemed. Living next to each other for a lifetime of expected activities, and now, everything was different. In their younger years going out to lunch was unheard of. The men never even went out while at work; at first they carried their lunches in pails, and then later in sacks. Once in a while Helen and Grace would stop at the Sun Drive-in with their girls for a burger. They stopped out of convenience and necessity. When the girls were preparing for their ballet recitals they lacked time to run back home for lunch, so Helen and Grace would pick them up between fittings and rehearsals. The girls sat in the back seat and ate quickly to return on time. It never left enough time for Helen and Grace to chat. Often the weather hadn't turned warm and the windows were frosty and the burgers cooled before they could finish them.

As Minnesotans, they expected to live a frugal, insular existence. People never felt that they needed to travel far from home for pleasure. If you couldn't find it at home, you couldn't find it. When Grace and Hank left Grand Rapids to live in the Cities, their friends and family could only accept that at least they weren't leaving Minnesota. Most of the people who graduated with them stayed in northern Minnesota. Many lived in the

homes and on the farms that their parents had owned. Many of the people in their generation had only left the state a handful of times. And aside from their big move to the Twin Cities, Grace and Hank followed suit. Vacations were spent at a cabin on a lake, activities were centered around the home. But now, even widows ventured out for lunch, and worried about their fashion statement.

Grace wondered why Helen felt she needed to school her on how to dress. Grace believed that all of her clothes were modern, despite the fact that they may not be chic. It didn't bother her, because she believed in her taste, in her style. She loved Oxford shirts. When had they gone out of style? She would see many young people dressed in the same twill Chinos that she had worn for years. And she always looked crisp; she was a master with an iron. In all her sixty-three years, she spent time each and every day making sure everything matched and that she looked impeccable. Helen could be chic if she wished, but Grace was timeless.

Helen drove. She was still confident on the highways. She whizzed around the city streets. She swung her car into the smallest parallel parking spot in front of Cafe Brenda, the chic, new, mostly vegetarian restaurant, housed in the corner of a revamped warehousey looking building. The entrance was through a lobby which afforded a view of the shops and offices occupying the building. Grace knew it was supposed to be chic, but it seemed cold to her.

They were greeted by a young man with a ponytail and three earrings lodged in the top cartilage part of his ear. Grace wondered what kind of man her granddaughter would have to choose from when it was her time to

marry.

"Ladies?" he seemed to ask.

Grace wished she were brave enough to answer with a "Man?" but she was never given to such foolish temptations.

Helen said, "A table for two, please."

Grace felt that Helen had completely taken over the role of a man.

"This way." The host turned and walked too fast for the two of them to follow closely. He quickly pulled out two chairs, at a two-person table, next to an enormously tall window. He turned and disappeared as if in a huff.

Helen removed her black leather gloves, a red beret, a red muffler, and a blazer that had a red handkerchief in its pocket to match the muffler and beret. Grace remembered how Helen used to look at the Sun Drive-in. In those days, Helen always wore a house dress. In the winter it was covered by a camel hair coat with a fake fur collar. The dress, always of a dull paisley, hung below the coat making her legs look squat. To add to her fashion mistakes she wore ankle height Kickerinos. Now she wore leggings with little cowboy looking boots. The whole outfit seemed at odds with itself, with her. If only there were before and after pictures of Helen. Instead of shedding pounds, she shed her husband. Like those ads found in the back of magazine, Helen's before picture would be in black and white, a bit fuzzy, emphasizing her dowdiness, and her after picture would feature this new Helen hardly recognizable.

"I came here with Edith a couple of months ago, and I loved it. The food is great." Helen draped her jacket over the back of her chair and sat down.

Grace had hung her coat at the door. She had worn a navy blue pea coat--a classic. Unlike Helen she didn't need to parade a costume through the restaurant. "I read the review in the Tribune." Grace would have preferred to eat at the Olive Garden or the Village Inn. As far as she was concerned you couldn't beat a good chain restaurant for value, choice and quick service.

"I'm Tiffany, your waiter," the bouncy little-girl acting, middle aged waitress said, handing them their menus. "Would you like to begin with a glass of wine?"

"Give us a minute to look over the list," Helen said without consulting Grace. Helen dropped her eyes to the wine list. "I know you'll find something good here."

"I'm not going to drink with lunch."

"Why not?"

"I wouldn't feel good the rest of the day."

"So? Day's over by the time you get home. What do you have planned?"

"I have things to do. I'm sewing a Rabbit for Natalie."

"OK, but if you were going to have a glass of wine, which I know you can handle, would it be white or red?"

"Probably white."

The waitress, who seemed to be waiting in the wings, appeared. "Are you ready?"

"We'll start with a half bottle of your house Chablis," Helen said.

"A good choice. I'll be right back." The waitress walked quickly while still writing on her pad. Grace noticed that she wore nylons with seams.

"I really don't want wine, Helen."

"Just a taste. If you don't like it, order something else. Remember this is my treat."

"That's another thing. I'd feel more comfortable if we split the bill."

"Your treat next time. You pick the restaurant. Are you ready to order?"

"What are you getting?"

"The pesto pizza. It comes in a single serving just like in Italy." Helen and Sal had traveled to Italy about a year before his death. It was their trip-of-a-lifetime. Helen alluded to it every chance she got. "It has just a hint of pesto--it's not at all overbearing, and just a sprinkle of crumbled gargonzola cheese," she twirled her fingers showing the sprinkle.

Grace had tasted pesto at the Olive Garden--one of the restaurants Hank enjoyed. But she didn't recall if she had had the cheese before. Germaine always brought a basket of exotic foods, herbs, wines and concoctions when she visited. She would take over the kitchen, or if Eric came too--which he rarely did--they would take over the kitchen. Typically, the strong, foreign odors would linger for more than a week after they left, despite Grace's diligent daily scouring. Grace hoped this wasn't one of those pungent cheeses.

The waitress returned with the small bottle of wine in a clay holder. She set it on the table and pulled a cork screw from her pocket. She wiped the bottle with a crisply laundered linen cloth and showed the label to both Helen and Grace. Grace felt impatience over such formality. This whole act would seem appropriate if it were evening and they were celebrating a special

occasion. She and Hank often spent their anniversary at the Orion Room, and Grace knew the routine of fine dining, but this was midday, an everyday occasion. Outside people passed in their work clothes, sloshing through melting snow, hurrying to get back to their desk jobs. And there Grace and Helen sat, for a leisurely meal, under bright lights in the midst of the bustle. Every aspect of it was unnatural.

"Are you ladies ready to order?" The waitress looked from Helen to Grace and back to Helen.

"I'd like the pesto pizza," Helen said.

"I'll have the same."

"Would either of you like a salad?"

"I'm fine," Helen said raising her brows in question to Grace.

"No thank you." Grace replied.

After the waitress left they settled into a conversation. Grace was thankful that they weren't sitting in silence. At least their talking took her mind off her discomfort.

"I know that you think I'm too forward, or maybe it's callousness that you see in me, but I lost my husband too. And I do know what you're going through," Helen reached across the table and squeezed Grace's hand.

Grace felt a sudden surge of emotion, and turned her head to look out the window. Once composed she finished off her glass of wine.

"You have to do what works for you, but I wish you weren't spending so much time alone. I was really surprised that you didn't go to visit Germaine in February. Don't you think it would help if you got away for a while?"

"Frankly I haven't felt the need. I don't like Jacksonville. I think that Hank enjoyed it more than me." Grace poured herself another glass of wine.

"I'm surprised. I always thought that you were so close to Germaine. And you certainly are a wonderful grandmother."

Grace wasn't sure why Helen said this. Grace believed that her relationship with Natalie appeared stiff. Most of the time Natalie seemed to ignore Grace. Even though Natalie would talk enthusiastically to Grace on the phone, once they were face to face, Natalie would barely speak.

"Now don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to push you, but do you think you'll see Rudy again? I know the timing is wrong to meet such a great guy, but at our age sometimes it's good to move quickly."

"He seems old to me," Grace was aware that the wine was prompting her words.

"Old! Rudy? I'm shocked. I see him as just the opposite. He's so young for his age."

"Maybe that's partially it." Grace halted. This was the same thing she saw in Helen. The harder she tried to seem young the more it showed off her age.

"Partially what?" Helen looked nonplused.

"Think of a child dressed in her mother's clothes. It only makes her look younger. It's the same when you're old, Helen. The same thing."

They had finished the small bottle of wine. When the food finally came, Helen ordered two more glasses. "No, that's not true. If a child acts adultlike she seems older than her years. If a child chooses conservative adult styled clothing, she seems older."

"That's your opinion," Grace said. She neatly cut her pizza and sampled a small bite. It seemed a bit salty, but the next bite was better.

"I'm glad you like the pizza, I was worried," Helen talked with food in her mouth. She finished chewing and said, "Come on Grace, you have to admit that Rudy is good looking and charming."

"He's very nice. But when you only know someone in their older years, when you can't see their youth, because you never knew it, they seem old."

"OK, so he's a nice old man. You're old. When are you going to see him again?"

"You see Helen, that's the whole thing I'm trying to avoid. One minute you're talking about me losing Hank and in the same breath you're trying to get me to date. Do the two go together? I can't think straight. One minute I think one thing and the next, I think the opposite."

Helen straightened up, leaned into her elbows that were on the table holding her wine glass. She seemed to be bracing herself for a strong defense of her position. Grace knew that Helen would simply reiterate her sentiments. Those sentiments would begin with phrases that could be coined by Hallmark: No words can express your loss of Hank. Only time will help to mend the pain. Blah, Blah, Blah. And then Helen would get back into her pitch for Rudy, her pitch for Grace's need to carry on. Knowing what Helen was about to say, Grace didn't feel the need to listen. Her focus pulled away from Helen and she looked just over her head to the street corner. The streetlight was green in the east-west direction. Four women in business dress began to cross. They seemed to be in an intense conversation, probably

office gossip. Their only concern was their conversation. They didn't turn an inch away from one another not even when a turning car came dangerously close to hitting them. Nor did they notice the lady crossing the light against its color.

When Grace spotted this woman, she raised her eyes to watch her. Grace lost her concern for feigning attention to Helen. At this point, Grace had caught the gist of Helen's monologue, which was not only as predicted but also propelled by too many glasses of wine. The whole scene felt slightly under the influence. After all the woman was crossing a busy street without the least hint of concern. Cars were stopping without honking. The four businesswomen didn't turn a hair. And Helen didn't notice that Grace was totally preoccupied. All the bustle seemed to slow until Grace saw this woman as if a messenger walking straight toward her. Grace felt a penetrating eye contact with the woman despite the fact that they were too far apart for such contact. Once the woman reached the restaurant side of the street, she headed right for Grace's window and stopped in front of it. Even Helen halted her monologue, for the woman was standing right up to the window staring at Grace, only the double pane glass separating them. Helen turned her head abruptly from the scene and said, "I'll get the check." Helen stood looking fretfully about the restaurant for the waitress.

The other patrons were turning and looking as were some passersby. The atmosphere seemed charged with fear and hostility, but Grace remained calm. She locked her eyes on the poor woman's. Although her face looked angry, the depth of her eyes showed a pain, the pain that Grace understood.

"We need our check," Helen frantically called while other customers

murmured about calling the manager, the police. Helen looked at Grace and said from the corner of her mouth, "For God's sake don't stare at her. You're making things worse. There's something wrong with her. People like her carry guns."

Grace got up and headed straight for the door.

"Grace, where are you going? I need to pay the bill."

Grace wanted to put her arms around the woman. She was troubled. She had come to Grace as a nail would be drawn to a magnet. Grace headed out the restaurant, through the outer building, and turned the corner. As she passed the windows the customers watched, all heads following her direction. The woman also followed Grace's journey, watching through the windows of the restaurant. As Grace turned the corner heading straight for the woman, the woman turned and walked on. She slipped her way among a group of people heading north. Grace lost sight of her almost immediately. Grace wanted to call to her, or to run to her, but she felt the glare of the customers, and was suddenly embarrassed. She dropped her head in a strange posture of defeat, feeling she must make this gesture to satisfy the spectators. She was cold without her coat but she suddenly felt that she should just leave her coat, and Helen, and not continue her embarrassment. She felt much as she had after the minister delivered his eulogy for Hank. At that moment she knew that she must face all those well meaning friends and family and she just wanted to be alone. Now she felt like walking away with the crowd, catching a bus, and leaving everything behind. But really where would she go without so much as her purse and her coat? Where would she go if she had them?

The host with the ponytail wasted no time telling Grace that the

woman was crazy but harmless. "We believe she lives down here, close. She doesn't appear to be homeless, but she'll come up about once a week and stare down a customer. There's not much we can do about it. She's not breaking any laws."

Grace didn't want this information. For one thing she couldn't stand the host's way of talking, the way he batted his lashes and clicked his tongue. What does a twerp like him know about that woman?

Helen was at the cash register. She had both purses slung over her shoulder.

The host asked, "Can you ladies drive? There's no shame in admitting that you've exceeded your limit."

Grace wanted to push him. She felt like giving him a shove and asking him just who he thought he was. But instead she said, "I suggest you mind your own business."

"Grace!" Helen choked out in an amazed voice. "We're fine. We're fine."

They hurried out, both of them putting on their coats as they left the building.

In the car, Helen said nothing. She didn't ask about the woman, the meal, the car's interior temperature. Instead she grasped the steering wheel tightly and drove earnestly. It was clear that she was trying to sober herself. Despite this, Grace was calm. Even when the car edged onto the shoulder and Helen jerked it back, Grace was calm. When Helen oversteered and the car inched into the left lane, Grace was calm. And finally when the car swerved completely off the road, and rolled out of control in slow motion, Grace was

calm.

Chapter Six Germaine

Germaine found that as spring approached, with its promise of intensifying heat, her mood had settled into a rhythm. She was edgy; she felt as if she would be short with Natalie, or possibly her conversations with her mother would be more sarcastic than sympathetic. But instead of letting go to urges of irritability, when she felt a swelter of mid-morning heat claiming her mood, she was able to turn it all around. And she found, that even though all of her typical hot weather images--images of stepping into oppressive air, of being enveloped in the stench of swamp gases and drifting industrial odors, of insects that swarm and huge palmetto bugs that scurry in a flash dragging their hard clicking bodies, of sweat and unpleasant dampness--were at the tip of her mind ready to engulf her momentum for the day, they didn't. Instead she locked onto a calming idea. Although she would force these thoughts, direct them each day, it would only take short promptings to be fixated on her pleasant escape. She saw herself breaking out from the heat and retreating to a cool fog-shrouded western resort. She watched the travelogue grow, play itself out, adding new details with each episode. And, yes, she would actually follow through with her plans.

Natalie's summer would be filled with gymnastics practice, and Eric could never take more than two weeks off at a time, so Germaine imagined that she and her mother would travel together. What an idea! Just think, her mother had never really been anywhere out west, practically nowhere at all. Germaine would expand her mother's limits. Germaine saw herself, this opportunity, as one of rescuer, of rescue. She and she alone would finally

take her mother someplace, show her something, get her out of the house. Germaine and Eric had already toured California's wine country and then driven up the coast to Oregon. Germaine remembered the route well enough that she could lead the trip with confidence.

Germaine had never left her family, and had never been alone with her mother. Her vision was that they would be adventurous, independent travelers. This would be a different trip without Eric; it would be her lead. They would stop more often, visit out-of-the-way places, eat earlier, go to little art galleries and gift shops. Germaine didn't see her mother as an obstacle to her independence; instead, her thoughts always drifted to a strong feeling of freedom from Eric and Natalie. If nothing else this reverie became a solid diversion from thoughts of her father. But Germaine knew it was more than a dream; she would do this, this one thing, this one independent act. Everyday, as she ended her thoughts on the matter, she made up her mind to stick with this promise to herself.

On the day that she received the phone call, she had felt optimistic all day. She had dreamed of her father, but she didn't write it down. She chose to put it behind her. She floated through the kitchen in her caftan, opening windows, capturing the coolness that would only linger through breakfast. Natalie sat at the table in shorts and a sweat shirt. Germaine concerned herself with making the table pretty, starting the day off right. She squeezed the orange juice into the little pitcher with yellow tulips, she transferred her homemade marmalade to a crystal bowl, she dug down deep in the linen drawer for the bright yellow napkins: all the little niceties that she retained from her single life. "It's going to be hot, but it's beautiful now," she

announced to Natalie, hoping that this perfect morning meal would influence Natalie's day.

"Hurry, Mommy, I'm going to be late."

"You've got plenty of time," Germaine leaned next to Natalie's cheek and gave her a quick peck. She felt that Natalie tensed, or maybe drew back a bit; it was nothing obvious, but she sensed it. Oh, but it was natural for a child of twelve to start to draw away from her parents. Why look for trouble in little gestures? Germaine settled in the seat next to her daughter.

Natalie pecked at her food. For some years she had insisted on using a fork for her oatmeal, which lead her to pick up little bits that coated the tongs, jabbing the fork from bowl to mouth in quick movements. When Natalie was five, Germaine thought this habit cute. "Do you eat like that when you stay at your friends'?" she asked.

"Sure, Jenny eats this way too. I taught her," Natalie looked up with her rheumy eyes.

Natalie suffered from spring allergies. Normally Germaine would remind her to use her tissue, but today Germaine looked at her daughter with sympathy. "I'll bet Jenny's mother doesn't appreciate her picking up your bad habits," Germaine tried to say this with a little laugh, hoping to show complicity in Natalie's naughty girl habits.

"Other mothers don't care how their kids eat."

Today, Germaine welcomed Natalie's little quibble of defiance. Although, of course, she wanted her daughter to maintain her proper respect, she also knew it was time to foster independence. Wasn't good parenting the skill of walking that fine line? Germaine sipped her coffee and watched

Natalie's movements with a new understanding.

After Natalie left for school, Germaine thought of her daughter in kind, tender terms. When she picked her up from school to drive her to the gym, she would have homemade cookies for her. She would compliment her on her hair, which had been pulled back loosely, softening her features, a point that Germaine had failed to mention.

She made cream of artichoke soup early, simmering it throughout the day, filling the house with the cream-of-soup-smell that Germaine remembered as a winter aroma. In fact, it was the last time Germaine planned to make hot soup until fall. But all day the aroma became like a white noise that crept into Germaine's sense of well being; she felt comforted, couched between the pleasant smell of her past and the daydream for her future, allowing her to work efficiently. After returning from the health club, she picked up the slack Marsha left behind from her too quick daily run-through. She even found time to dust picture frames, rearrange the kitchen junk drawer, and clean the refrigerator bins. The day had been controlled and unclouded, the first completely successful day since her father died, and then the phone call came.

It came after dusk. Eric had phoned earlier to say he would be home late, so Germaine was holding off on final preparations for supper. When the phone rang, Germaine thought it was her mother. But after an uncomfortable introduction, (I'm a friend of your mother. Actually, I've only just met your mother. I'm sorry to introduce myself to you, under these circumstances), Rudy blurted out that Grace had been in a terrible car accident. Why did he use the word terrible? Germaine was struck with panic. She

didn't believe it was a selfish reaction, but one of her first thoughts was that now their trip would be impossible. Her initial panic turned to a passive resignation. His words had little meaning, she could imagine the outcome already. And if her mother were dead, if her mother died, Germaine would have never spent any time alone with her. It was then that she realized her intense need to be alone with her mother. It was a need she now knew she also had for her father. What did she know of either of her parents as individuals? They always came as a package. And this package was always wrapped tightly in their marital politics. The only time she spent alone with her father was the time when her mother was in the hospital, and their brief time running errands when he visited. She and her mother had been alone only when she was a child and then it was confined to lunch breaks, her mother lecturing about eating, or homework, or being more organized. For God's sake she needed to know more. What if her mother died? A rush of terror seized her and at once she was sobbing.

"I think she'll be fine," Rudy said, with alarm in his voice. "I'm sorry to upset you so, but she'll be fine, really. Do you understand me?"

It was as if Germaine were incapable of believing that this terrible car accident would allow her mother to be fine. She continued to sob.

"She's the one who asked me to call. She can talk. It's only that she needed stitches by her lip, and it's hard for her to talk . . . but she's really OK. Do you understand that?"

Germaine could only understand her deep longing, her desperate need for her parents, the jeopardy she believed was before her.

"Listen, maybe I should call your husband. Would that be good? Can

you give me his number?"

"What?"

"Your husband. I need to call your husband," Rudy said this slowly and loudly, as if she were deaf or unable to speak English.

"No, No. Don't do this." Germaine pictured Eric. He would be calm and rational. He would hold her outburst against her. "No, don't call him. Just tell me the truth. Tell me what happened."

"The truth is she'll be fine," he said. "Fine."

When Eric walked in from work, Germaine was at the kitchen table wearing his oversized T-shirt that the operating room staff had given him for his fortieth birthday. There was an outline of a doctor's lab coat on the front of the shirt. It had a picture of a tie, pockets, and a stethoscope. Eric would never consider wearing the silly thing, but Germaine wore it to clean in because of its generous size. She always took the time to change and fix herself up before Eric got home. But she had been unable to move since the call.

Even though it was only mid-March, Germaine had a deep end-of-the-summer tan. She sat on the chair with her knees up under the shirt. Her hair was pulled up and under a baseball cap, and she looked much younger than her forty-one years.

"What's up?" He stood behind her chair and placed his hand softly on the back of her neck. He began to knead it, slowly, tenderly.

The last thing in the world that Germaine wanted to do was to start crying, but she couldn't stop herself. She sunk her face into her knees and

wept softly. Her heaving shoulders betraying her. Germaine couldn't escape the idea that it was natural to seek comfort from her husband, but she would do anything not to fall into this trap. How could she be more vulnerable?

"What's wrong?" Eric dropped down next to her chair. She could smell his cologne, and the starch of his shirt. "Tell me, what's happened."

"My mother was in an accident, but she's OK." Germaine held up her hand and tried to wave Eric away. She could hear him pull out a chair and sit down. "I'm OK Eric, just give me a minute."

"What happened?" Eric's voice sounded his incredulity. "Was she driving?"

"Eric please, give me a minute. Don't badger me." Her tone was resolute and harsh.

"I'm not trying to badger you, but . . . but don't keep me in suspense like this. It isn't fair."

Germaine raised her head, pushed back her cap, and revealed her tears to Eric. "Are you satisfied?"

"What do you mean? What's happened?"

"You could have let me compose myself."

"Germaine, just tell me what happened."

Germaine cleared her throat and was able to muster a clinical tone, the one she had heard so often from Eric. "My mother needed fourteen stitches near the corner of her mouth."

"Did they call in a plastics guy?"

"I think so, but don't interrupt."

"Sorry."

"And she has a contusion of her ribs and right lung. Other than that she's fine."

"And what about the accident? The car?"

"Helen was driving."

"What happened to Helen?"

"She has a broken ankle; bumps and bruises. The car was totaled."

"Well how did all of this happen? Was it snowing? Was another car involved?"

"No. No. They just slid off the road."

"Jesus, how is that possible?"

"Some guy called. God, I just don't know what's going on up there. I'm just too far away."

"What do you mean some guy?"

"A friend, he said."

"So, it sounds as though it's under control. You don't need to be so upset."

"Yeah, well I am." Germaine pushed the chair back and got up. She walked to the refrigerator and pulled out some lettuce. She ran it under the cold water. She placed her hands on the top of the head and let the water run over them. She thought of herself and her mother standing together on the shore of the Pacific. They would have been so cool, so confident, but instead she pictured her mother huddling in a hospital bed with her injuries. Tears began to flow.

"Well this certainly is a shock," Eric said and moved behind Germaine. He put his arms around her from behind. He moved them up and

crisscrossed them over her chest. He swayed her gently. "It sounds like it's going to be fine."

"Yeah, well it's not your mother."

"That's not fair, Germaine. I'm not a villain, I'm your partner." He stopped the motion. He slowly removed his arms from her.

Germaine resisted any temptation to turn and cry in his arms. Dr. Cavitch had talked about her tendency to view Eric as an enemy. He said that it wasn't unusual in a marriage, because marriage did involve a struggle for power, but there were times when this feeling was more destructive than at other times. It was her job to make sure she wasn't letting a defensive guard creep into their intimate moments. Ever since that session, she saw Eric as her enemy most of the time.

Germaine would have canceled the dinner party, but felt it was too short notice. From Wednesday evening's call to Friday's evening party was a hard transition; her concern for her mother, and the renewed sense of loss for her father, kept surfacing. Thankfully, she pulled off dinner parties with ease; after all she had been a caterer. The house would be perfectly appointed, all their guests' needs attended to. And the food prepared and presented beautifully. Germaine did this with amazing alacrity. She didn't need notes, or a timetable. She rarely used a recipe. It was her forte. By nature, she timed and executed everything perfectly, so that when the first guest arrived she looked calm and striking.

Germaine wasn't a classic beauty. She didn't have perfect features. Her eyes were wide set and her mouth too full. Her hair had a tendency toward

the dry side and if it wasn't trimmed regularly, it looked split and damaged. She was low-waisted. And since she had joined the health club, and lost more weight than intended, her knees and hands were bony. But she was graceful and she moved with an apparent purpose, a flare. When she entertained she laughed easily. And unlike other easy-laughers who cackle, or crow, or give a machine gun rivet, or nervous twitters--her laugh was free and seductive. Her teeth bright and straight, her movements eye-catching.

Tonight she greeted her guests in her flowing silk lounging pants, a form-fitted yoke-necked body suit, and bare feet. Her hair conditioned, bounced and shined just below shoulder length. She gathered the hostess gifts as the guests presented them, giving the appropriate amount of praise for each bottle of wine and liquor. She ushered everyone to the pool area where Marsha poured drinks near the open fireplace.

Tonight, Eric, who was also a natural host, would be in the shower when the guests arrived. One of his cases had been bumped by an emergency, so that he had run late all day. Just five minutes before the first guest came, he flew in the door, pulling at his tie, pulling off his shoes. "I told you that Saturday was a better night than Friday. But you insisted, and now I'm late," he called to Germaine as she surveyed the finishing touches.

"Oh for crying out loud Eric, they're all doctors. They're your colleagues. They expect this."

"Expect it or not, I rush all day and I don't like being rushed through the evening. Do you have time to bring me a drink?"

Germaine brought him a bourbon on the rocks. He downed it and asked for another. By the time everyone had assembled around the pool,

bathed in soft indirect and full-moon light, Eric made his entrance. Germaine could see that he was relaxed; his glass was full again. He looked crisp and shower-fresh. He would have looked casual in his jeans, if he had not completed his outfit with a vest and dressy looking loafers. He made his way toward Germaine, greeting other guests as he passed. Germaine was talking to Jane and Allen who were both doctors. Once at Germaine's side he kissed her cheek and briefly put his arm around her shoulder, squeezing it firmly, swilling the ice around in his glass. He shook Allen's hand and leaned to kiss Jane's cheek.

"We were just waiting for you, so we can start dinner. Are you ready?"

Germaine turned to Marsha and smiled, her signal to roll out the salad cart. Three four-person tables were set around the pool, covered in white floor-length table clothes. Germaine cleared her throat and asked everyone to take a seat. She helped Marsha distribute the salad and rolls, while Eric poured wine. The dinner moved smoothly. Allen and Jane shared Germaine and Eric's table and between them they finished three bottles of wine. Germaine watched Eric pop up, as soon as the bottles emptied, making the rounds to see who wanted more.

After dinner they moved to the living room, while Marsha stayed behind to clean up. Germaine had filled the CD carousel with light classical music, but Eric insisted on getting everyone's vote before starting the machine. After promptings from two of Eric's close colleagues, the group decided that sixties rock would put them in a good mood. But as the night moved on, and the booze flowed irresponsibly, the group seemed to settle into a nostalgic mood. Not the form of nostalgia that promotes camaraderie,

but rather the form which moved people to their private memories. There were little pockets of lethargic conversation, and people moved about freely to fill glasses and slice cheese. Germaine felt uncomfortable; the evening had a narcotic timeless edge to it. She was glad that Natalie was sleeping over at a friend's.

Germaine wanted to get the party moving or end it. Usually this group talked about their outstanding cases, or ethical considerations, or the arts, or travel--conversation she would welcome; but, instead, tonight the atmosphere was heavy with a collective mourning for the past.

Eric was sitting on the floor in front of the CD cabinet. He sat with his legs together bent at his left side; he leaned forward resting his weight on his right arm as he pored over choices for the next set of music. Germaine sat on the floor next to him and said, "What do you say we get away from this flashback mode?"

"Everyone wanted it." He didn't look up, but instead he pushed the plastic cases around like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

"I'm going to put on coffee, and serve cake. How about a hand?"

"A hand? You're asking me for a hand?" He began talking louder than he needed and looked up at her raising his eyes in a menacing posture. He dropped his voice to a sharp whisper and lowered his eyes as if complaining to himself. "I thought you were the one who could do everything yourself."

"What brought this on? Can we talk about this later?" She said in a hushed tone and pushed herself up and picked up his glass.

As she maneuvered around the guests she thought she overheard one of the guys say, "trouble in paradise."

From the kitchen she could make out the group's interaction brewing. It sounded as if someone were asking Eric for his opinion. She hoped that it wasn't concerning Clinton's health care package or some other political issue. When she heard Eric's voice rise, she feared it was. She wanted to retreat from the whole scene, but knew that it was her duty to avert such heated conversation. She hurried to slice the cake. She pushed the cart in with cups of coffee served up and cake already on the plate, suggesting a quick close to the party. Eric was the only one standing and talking. Everyone was looking at him, even Jane who had seemed to be sleeping when Germaine left the room.

"Coffee and cake," Germaine announced with disregard for Eric's speech.

"Excuse me, I was talking," Eric said with levity in his voice, despite the piercing glance at Germaine. He turned to his guests and said, "I won't even try to compete with Germaine's double chocolate cake." He smiled wryly, giving a wink, being the charmer.

The crowd lined up and the party conversation returned. Jane was the first to rave about the cake, Jeremy patted Eric on the back assuring him he was a lucky man. Germaine was ready with another round of coffee. The music stopped and the room was left with the clatter of cups and saucers and small groups of chit-chat and light laughter. Although no one was moving toward that door, or heading off to the bathroom, there was an air of closure, as if, at any moment, the rush of final complements would come. Germaine moved behind each small group and reached in to pour. She didn't connect with anyone's conversation, so she moved in and out and around like a bee.

Eric was in a group with Peter and Lisa. They were the youngest couple, still in their early thirties. Peter was a hematologist who had just joined the medical group, and Lisa was an investment counselor. Germaine reached around Lisa and began to fill her cup. Eric stopped talking and looked at her. "Maybe you'd like to stay and listen."

"Why sure. Let me set the coffee down." She slid out behind them and placed the carafe on the cart. When she returned she realized how drunk Eric was. His eyes were red and even his hair was out of place. He was talking over financial planning with Lisa. His words seemed slurred and Germaine wished the night were over.

"Eric just told me about the death of your father," Lisa said. Lisa was a short woman, with mousy looks and taste, much like her husband's. "I'm so sorry. My father died when I was only fourteen. You never get over it."

Even if it were true, Germaine didn't want to hear that she'd never get over it. Germaine smiled and nodded at Lisa, trying to look knowingly.

"How is your mother doing?" Peter asked.

"OK, under the circumstances." This was Germaine's standard answer. She had said it hundreds of times.

"She had a car accident," Eric chimed in. "And it seems she might have a boyfriend." He turned to Germaine and smiled like a bad boy.

Germaine was shocked that Eric would say such a thing. It was so uncharacteristic of him. First of all, neither of them had spoken of the possibility of Rudy being her mother's boyfriend even if it were implied or assumed by them both. And besides, Eric never, never aired what might smack of dirty laundry. "Eric," she cried out and clicked her tongue. "Really."

And tried to add a little laugh, hoping not to give any credence to what Eric was saying. Germaine turned toward the couple and said, "I don't believe my mother has a boyfriend, but she was in an accident, with a friend, a female friend." She turned to Eric nodded her head and smiled. "And she's recovering fine."

"Yes, despite a .02 blood alcohol, I might add," Eric chortled, appearing to show disdain for Grace.

Germaine felt a need to confute Eric's attitude toward her mother, yet she wished to end the whole intoxicated conversation. "Eric doesn't really know my mother's blood alcohol. My mother may have had a few drinks, which is most unlike her. But it was the middle of the day, for god's sake; she certainly wasn't drunk."

"Actually, I do know your mother's blood alcohol. I spoke to the doctor."

"You did? You didn't tell me that. Why did you go behind my back? I don't understand."

Allen came up behind Eric and cupped his hand around the back of his neck. As a playful gesture he ruffled his neck and tried to get Eric to loosen up, but Eric held his head stiff, making Allen's gestures appear violent. "Hey, buddy, what's up?" Allen asked.

"Come on," Eric pushed away Allen arm. "I'm OK." Eric seemed to snap out of it. "I guess I was teasing my wife at the wrong time."

"Well, we're heading out," Allen announced.

"I guess we're about ready, too," Peter said.

Soon they were all leaving. After the last taillights disappeared from

the drive, Germaine felt weighed down by the heavy silence. She wanted to confront Eric with his ill behavior, but it was late and she felt too exhausted for a showdown. However, she couldn't let this go. Tomorrow Natalie would be home, and these feelings, left unsaid, would fester under the surface. Maybe their polite behavior was only the result of creating an illusion for their daughter.

Eric went over to the CD player and picked out their Stan Getz favorite. The one they danced to at their wedding. Germaine could hear it as she loaded the dishwasher. Marsha would come back in the morning, but Germaine wanted to run one load.

Eric came into the kitchen singing, "Ching, ching, ching," to the tune of the "Girl from Ipanema." Germaine knew it was a conciliatory move, but it wasn't enough. He had humiliated her; he had gone behind her back; he had betrayed her family. "Eric cut it out. There's something behind your behavior. I'm sure your friends will forgive you, we all make mistakes, but I wouldn't accept it as a lark. There is something behind this."

"What are you talking about? You're making a mountain out of a molehill."

"Why did you choose to use my mother as a weapon?"

"Why kind of psycho-babble is that?"

"Call it what you like, but it's the truth. And I demand to know what's behind this." She stood firm in front of him, making him look at her. "Tell me," she shouted.

"Don't yell," he shouted back. He cleared his throat and calmly repeated, "Don't yell." He looked down away from her and took a deep

breath. "My mother used to yell." He looked up into her eyes. He had a pained expression that looked too theatrical to be completely convincing. "Did I ever tell you that? Or maybe you wouldn't be interested in anything but your perfect family."

Despite the various acts that Germaine could see through, she usually believed Eric. She couldn't recall him lying to her. But he had never once mentioned any ill behavior of his parents' before, never hinted at it. For a brief moment she hoped that he was finally revealing a side of him she could pity. But this was too unbelievable. He seemed too insincere, and still tipsy. But she would not fall into calling his bluff, she would play along, see if he would sweat out a lie. "Eric, honey, I'm so sorry. You never said anything before about this. I didn't know. I don't want to fight. But I need to know why you were picking on my mother."

Eric made a half-circle around the table and turned to face her continuing his histrionics, "Yes, and we've worked to emulate their behavior. I admired your parents' good behavior, but your mother always seemed discontent."

"If my mother were discontent, wouldn't my father be discontent, too?"

"Indeed," he continued his circle around the table, and then as if having a change of heart, he backed around a bit and sunk deeply into a chair. He raised a finger, signaling a declaration. "But," he hesitated. "But, it was her insidious nagging that flawed their relationship so. It wasn't necessarily malicious, but all the same it was nit picky. And of course there were all those underlying messages."

"Eric, you're being extremely hard on my mother." Germaine remained standing, folding her arms. "She nagged, but my dad talked under-his-breath. For god's sake, they were together for forty-eight years. It was part of their routine. They didn't read things into it, why should you?"

"I'm really not trying to read things into it--into anything." His tone changed and picked up some warmth. He continued in a low, almost wistful voice, "But I read things into our relationship. It's funny because I get so much respect from everyone, but I don't think you really respect me."

"Is that what you want from me?" She moved her arms, and hands in a gesture of questioning.

"Of course. It's everything. Think about it."

"Eric, this is silly. It's like a line from the sixties: will you respect me in the morning." She folded her arms again posturing her defiance.

"You see, you're cheapening my feelings, like Grace used to do to Hank." Under the track lighting the deep shadows of his face revealed more than his true image.

"I really didn't mean to, but how can you feel that I don't respect you? I'm always careful to show respect. We don't fight, we rarely argue, we don't nag, because I'm respectful. Eric I respect you. You're next to perfect. Everything about you is just so. You have all the qualities that people aspire to. Really, what more can I say."

"You don't respect my feelings," he repeated himself in a wounded tone. His face fell in sadness. "I have real feelings."

"I'm sure you do, but you don't show them."

"Neither do you."

Suddenly Germaine wanted to tell him some simple truth, but she didn't know what it was. She didn't know the truth. She crouched before him, placing her arms across his knees, looking into his eyes. What could she say?

He opened his legs and pulled her up to his face. He kissed her desperately, without regard for anything but passion. He kissed her so long and hard that it became physically painful and she pulled away. He was clutching so tight that she had to struggle herself free. She pulled back and looked up at him. Both he and the night seemed desperate. He moved toward her on the hard, cold kitchen floor. He let his weight fall on her. His moves were hard, groping. The glass table was just above his head, and the light reflected harshly into Germaine's eyes. She twisted and turned to get out from under his wet, heavy kissing. The floor was cold and painful. She pulled her head to the side, and his elbow pulled at her hair.

"Stop, stop, ouch, you're hurting me. Let's go to bed. Come on get up," she cried.

He stood gracefully as a swan. Once his weight left her body, a feeling of weightlessness took over. He pulled her gently toward their room. She couldn't believe the light floating sensation she felt by letting Eric guide the way. He put her to bed as if she were a child. He tucked her in. He tucked himself in. The moon set as Germaine finally fell into a nightmarish sleep.

Chapter Seven

Grace

Everyone said Grace was lucky. "When you see the car you'll know that God was with you," Rudy said, holding a bouquet of jonquils. In fact, she was so lucky that she would be discharged the next morning. She would be discharged with no time to recover her sense of balance, to put herself back together, to heal her wounds. She wanted to visit Helen, but Helen was on another floor and there wouldn't be time for that. Her head was spinning with the thought of being kicked out. Who would take care of her? Grace realized how much she needed a family member, a family. Who else did she know that was so completely alone? Perhaps the woman in the window?

Certainly Helen was not in Grace's position. Under the circumstances she didn't want to begrudge Helen anything--poor Helen would need a pin put in her ankle. But she couldn't wipe from her mind the fact, the looming fact, that Helen had family near. Mary Beth, with her glowing bubbly teenaged children, would arrive to take Helen home in a flourish. But Grace was kicked out, on her own. Yes, the geriatric case worker, Ms. Thompson, talked to "her friend," Rudy, and it was all arranged: he'd see to her care. But he wasn't family, how could he provide care? Grace certainly didn't want a strange man ranging through her house, her personal affects, her personal life. Why wouldn't the so-called caseworker know that?

The morning of her discharge, Grace forced herself out of bed to try her best to put herself back together. Her Oxford shirt was wrinkled, having been stuffed into a bag by the emergency room staff. Her coat was covered in blood.

If only she had someone who knew her closet, and her taste. Someone who could bring her proper cosmetics; she was left to work with the few items she had in her purse which were strictly for touch-ups. And her hair, couldn't anyone, maybe an aid, spend fifteen minutes giving her a shampoo? Looking at her puffy eye, her swollen lips, her blood matted hair, Grace decided that the first thing she would tell Germaine, when they spoke, was that she wanted a closed coffin when the time came.

As the perky little nursing assistant pushed Grace in the wheelchair--in a too fast and too jerky manner--through the corridors of the busy hospital, the back of Grace's hair became damp with perspiration and her knees began to shake. By the time they reached the front entrance and she was ready to transfer to Rudy's waiting vehicle, she felt as if she wouldn't make it. God, there he was all smiles, holding yet another bouquet of jonquils. Was he too sure of himself or was he too insensitive to realize how shaken she was?

Between the aide and Rudy--in their zest and cheery demeanor--they practically flung Grace into the seat. Rudy said, "I guess we didn't realize you were light as a bird." He reached in to strap her seat belt with total disregard for where he touched her. This was custodial care--well-meaning people who forget that they're taking care of a human. For god's sake, she only had a car accident. Would Rudy spoon feed her over her protestations?

She glimpsed herself in the sideview mirror. Yes, she looked worn and injured, as expected; but mostly, she looked vulnerable. "Rudy, when we get to my house, please just leave me. Please go home."

"Oh, no can do. I told Ms. Thompson that I'd stay with you for two days. That's how I got you out of there."

"No, no, no. You can't stay. I don't want it. Why doesn't someone ask me what I want?"

"The patient doesn't always know best. Don't worry. I'll be out of sight. If you need me I'm there, if not, you won't even know that I'm there."

"I'll know."

"Hey, give me a chance. I'm a good cook," he said with a coy smile.

"I'll make whatever you desire."

"I've lost my appetite." She turned away from him and turned to look out the window.

Most of the snow had melted, or was melting quickly. The roads were tracked by rivulets of fast running water. Grace felt as if she had lost several days. She remembered driving away, to her lunch with Helen, in the snow. She couldn't remember the accident, but she was sure that everything had been covered with snow. Now, lawns were peeking through and the sun had baked the highways clean. When they drove up into her driveway, she felt that her house had transformed since she left it. It seemed as if she had been gone for an entire season. She was struck, she was overwhelmed, by the fact that her house hadn't looked like this since Hank died. It was as if the coldness of his death had been unlocked, and her first impression was that she'd walk in and find him alive.

She was truly weak to the bone over the thought of it all, and she was glad to lean on Rudy as they walked to the door. He wanted to escort her to her bed, but she wouldn't hear of it. She'd sit in the kitchen where she felt most at home.

"If you're OK sitting up, I don't see the harm." He said as if it were any

of his business where she sat. "How about some tea?"

"I'll get it," she said.

"Indeed you won't! I'm at your service. Where's the kettle? Where's the tea?"

He followed directions well. Grace was comforted that if she had to have a caretaker that at least he was competent. Surely Hank couldn't have filled this role.

"How bout if I prop some pillows on the couch for you? Get you a blanket? Turn on the TV?" he asked.

On the couch she dozed off after the first commercial break when the theme song of As the World Turns ended. When she woke, Rudy tried to report the action of the story. But he mixed up the characters' names and instead of endearing her to him, it frustrated her.

"I hope you don't mind, but I ran home and brought over a crock pot of homemade vegetable soup. I started it before I left to pick you up this morning. So I just sneaked out and got it. You were really out."

"I'd really like to take a shower and wash my hair."

"You're pretty weak. I think a bath would be better. I could run it for you and then you'd only have to slip in and out."

"I have to wash my hair."

"OK, once you're out of the tub. I'll wash it for you in the kitchen sink. How'd that be?"

"My Lord, no."

"Why not?"

"Don't be silly. I couldn't have you doing such a thing." It was all silly.

The whole idea--having Rudy run the tub, having him find her robe, having him carefully lead her to her room so that she could slip into her underwear and a flannel nightgown while he waited behind the closed door--was all preposterous. But when she finally conceded to let him try to help her with a shampoo, leaning over the kitchen sink as he directed the nozzle to the back of her neck and the warm water poured over her head, she felt as comfortable as she did with Racine, her hairdresser. She felt as "at home" as she had felt under the care of her own mother. Only at first did she tense when she leaned forward and the blood filled the area near the cut on her upper lip, but when his hands massaged her neck and her hair, wet with shampoo and warm water, all her pain was released. He pushed his body close and she felt comfortable.

Under the light of the kitchen table fixture he carefully combed her hair, helping her blow dry the back. He clicked off the drier, "I don't know how this is going to turn out."

"I only care that it's clean. Don't worry."

He whistled over the noise of the dryer. He seemed so content to be her caretaker that she willingly fell into his hands. Once he finished, he ran upstairs to return her drier to its proper place. He came down the stairs with the little kit from the hospital. "I need to put this cream on your lip. I don't think it will hurt. The Doctor said it would help it heal and fade completely. You'll never know you had stitches."

He cupped her chin and held her face up to the light. He ran his finger so softly across the wound that it was like the butterfly kisses Natalie used to give with her eyelashes.

"OK, my lady, now that that's all out-of-the-way, what will it be? Wine? or a pain killer?"

She took a glass of wine with her soup.

When the phone rang, Rudy was doing the dishes and Grace was back on the couch, but he sprang up to get it. "Hello . . . Well, this is Rudy. We talked yesterday. I'm a friend of your mother's." He twisted the telephone cord around his finger and smiled at Grace. "Yes, well, the hospital assigned me to watch over her for a few days. She's getting along just fine. Here, I'll put her on."

Rudy covered the receiver and whispered to Grace, "It's Germaine, she seems a bit angry."

"I don't like this one bit," Germaine said to Grace. "You watch out. He could be one of those guys who bilk older woman."

Grace didn't like her tone. Even though she had always been free with her advice, as if she knew more about life than her own mother, she usually kept it respectful. Grace understood that Germaine might feel threatened over the idea of another man seemingly taking over the role of her father, but she seemed totally oblivious to the fact that Grace had no one else to take care of her. Did Germaine volunteer to fly up and help out?

And then, to add to her selfishness, she proceeded to tell Grace all about her party, never once mentioning Grace's condition, never considering that Grace might not wish to talk, or that Grace might be in pain, or that Grace had been in danger. She recognized that Germaine was exhibiting some of the same behavior that she had shown at the funeral when she fussed too

much about wearing black, cheapening the tragedy of her own father's death. Surely her response was a stress reaction; her way of coping, or not coping with the tragedy. But Helen could only identify Germaine's behavior; she couldn't forgive it. Maybe Helen's Mary Beth would be a good nurse for Helen's homecoming, but Grace couldn't be happier with Rudy.

Grace's recovery was quick. Once the stitches were out only a thin line at the corner of her lip remained and it seemed to fade daily. The whole accident seemed like a remote memory and she could have easily fallen back into her routine, if it were not for Rudy and Helen. Rudy had gone home after his promised two day stay, but he remained attentive to her needs, becoming a steady date. And then, within a week and a half, Helen was home. She chose not to stay at Mary Beth's; but instead, she had a nursing assistant and a bi-weekly housekeeper. She was quick to return to her former confidence. With all the snow melted, she maneuvered easily about the neighborhood on her crutches. Grace wondered why she even needed the nursing assistant.

Two days after Helen's return, she was at Grace's door. She told Grace over and over how sorry she was, how foolish she had been. The sentiments would have been appreciated if she had appeared humbled by the accident. But the conversation rolled around to Helen's health care program, being the know-it-all, trying to enlist Grace in AARP so she too could be qualified for a program that would allow her paid home health care workers. And then, Helen seemed particularly arrogant when she pulled out the new car brochures.

That night, while at a restaurant dining with Rudy, Grace was pleased not to have to rely on Helen for friendship. Of course, she didn't want to suggest to herself that Rudy was a friend the way that Helen had been. For he was pursuing her, and she was allowing it. He had arrived that evening with a bunch of roses that she recognized as the kind sold by the lady from her car parked in the vacant lot next to the 7-11 for \$3.00 a bunch, but Grace knew it was more than a last minute thought. She knew that nothing about his actions toward her was last minute.

"I figured you were too young for red roses, so I picked out the yellow ones." He looked proud delivering his line.

Always the kidder she thought, but didn't say it. She recalled the first May basket she received as a child. This suitor had somewhat the same expression as her first. "What a surprise." She tried to smile sweetly, but it felt phony to her.

After their dinner they drove alone the shore of Lake Nakomis. Rudy pulled the car into a parking lot. It was too chilly to walk outside, but they opened his moon roof and he pointed out Orion's Belt and Canis Major. She was impressed by his knowledge of the stars, and his ability to turn this parking situation away from what could become uncomfortable. Instead of him awkwardly reaching across the car for her, they leaned back and talked freely about the past, about the future.

They didn't get to her house until after midnight. He opened her door and asked, "Walk you to the door?"

Grace had forgotten to leave the porch light on and she fumbled for the key. Finally opening the door she said, "Come in for coffee."

She turned the bright light of the kitchen on and ground some amaretto flavored beans. As she poured the water into the top of the coffee maker, Rudy came up behind her and looked over her shoulder. She turned her head and smiled. And he put his arms lightly around her waist. Feeling his body against her, she set down the coffee pot. Not looking into his face made her imagine, for a second, that he was a young man, and she a young woman. She hadn't really believed she would have sex again. In fact, she never thought about old people having sex even though Helen claimed that she and Sal had sex the night before his death. Grace just couldn't imagine it.

Rudy's short white whiskers rubbed against her neck. She felt his ancient hand inching close to her breast. What kind of man, no matter how old, wished to feel her loose skin, and sagging breast? Please don't touch me THERE she thought, yet she didn't move.

"I'm falling in love with you," he said. His breath was warm against her ear and neck. He was breathing the backseat breathing of her youth. She caught her own breath. She wouldn't give in to a shadow of days past. "Please, Rudy, you're making me uncomfortable," she said with a conviction she rarely used with men.

He turned her toward him. She turned slowly, hesitantly. He was so much taller than Hank had been when he died. He was probably close to the height that Hank had been when they married.

"Embrace me you sweet embraceable you," he said swaying his body in a dancing motion. He rotated her pelvis slightly with the sway of his body. "Embrace me you sweet embraceable you," he sang. He hummed and held her hand up and swallowed it up in his rough, wrinkled, hands. "I knew it

was you, the first time I saw you at the dance hall." His voice sounded so damn sincere, so damn sincere, despite his lines. The lines she had heard year after year in those corny movies. God those damn movies she lived on when Hank was in the war, and she was so young. Why was this all coming back to her now?

"I'm going to ask you," he looked into her eyes. "Will you marry me?"

How could he ask such a question? How could she answer it? She couldn't just say no to such pleading boylike eyes. She shrugged, "I don't know. This isn't right."

He kissed her lightly and slowly. He looked at her and sang, "It had to be you."

She turned quickly back to the coffee. "I have to finish pouring this or we'll never get a cup." She steadied her right hand with her left.

He stood heavy behind her. "I'm not going to make you nervous. I promise."

She would not tell Germaine anything until after they were married. Why should she? She wasn't looking for approval, and she certainly wasn't going to have a real wedding. She and Rudy would drive over to South Dakota where there was no waiting period. And then after they settled in, she would phone Germaine. She would simply say that things were right between them and they were married. Let Germaine analyze this rebound marriage however she wished, she would make her move and the whole thing would be settled and intact when Germaine found out. All her words

and advice would be too late.

All the way to South Dakota, it looked as though it might snow, but it never did. It would have been unusual to snow so late in the spring, after all it was almost the first of May. The prairie was more barren than she remembered, and it seemed to long for a dusting of snow.

Rudy told her several times that he was the happiest man alive, and he was acting like it. He told her stories of his boyhood--the time he shot himself in the leg with a 22. He was ten and much more afraid of his mother than of a gunshot wound. He couldn't face his mother. He limped home and sat in his room for two hours until his brother made him tell.

Grace tried to picture Rudy's mother, but it was hard thinking of the mother of this man being younger than she was now. They were so old to be getting married. Why didn't Rudy see that at all? She felt self-conscious. Helen had talked her into buying a white suit from Victoria's Secret. It was tailored and traditional looking, except for the lace camisole under the jacket. Rudy loved it. And of course that was the whole point, yet she couldn't stop looking down at her cleavage. The white only emphasized her wrinkles and then to see the peak of the French lace camisole stretched over her matronly bosoms made her think: who are you trying to kid, Grandma? What will they think in Watertown, S. D.?

"You know that you're more beautiful than a well-kept fifty year old woman. And as we both know now, fifty is young. I'm serious."

"I guess I'm flattered, but I really feel silly. I just never considered that this part of my life would come back."

"You need to learn that you're not dead until you're dead, Grace."

Nothing in you dies, no matter how old it feels at times. When you're married for a long time, you get so numb to things, and you put too many things in the past. Look at Theran and Clarence's fiftieth anniversary, everything they talked about was in the long, long ago past. We don't have that. We won't make it to fifty years, thirty years, twenty years. Instead we have the here and now. That's what being young is, you know. Living while you're living. Just think, we're kids again no matter how old we look." He laughed a happy yet serious laugh.

But she didn't want to feel the way she felt when she was twenty. She had spent too much time getting away from that age, and there must be some reason for moving so far from those feelings.

The Justice of the Peace weighed well over two hundred pounds, possibly three hundred. After they filled out the forms they were directed to a clinic for a blood test. Given clearance, they returned and the Justice stepped from behind a counter to the small lobby of his office. "We'll need a witness," he looked about, his breathing labored by talking. Sweat beaded across his forehead.

A woman left her desk and smiled at them as she took her position behind Rudy.

Grace couldn't recall the ceremony, but remembered being pronounced man and wife. By the time the Justice arrived at this part of the ceremony, he had to dab his forehead as the sweat inched toward his eyes. And then it happened. He mustered the last of his energy and boomed out in a raspy, baritone voice, "I now pronounce you man and wife." He didn't continue

with 'you may now kiss the bride' but instead he turned immediately to the paperwork. "OK I need to make this official. We have to get Judy's signature and get her back to work." The three of them stood awkwardly behind the behemoth of a man waiting for their turns to sign the forms. Grace was summoned last to sign, and she felt overwhelmed by the heat and odor that emanated from the Justice's body. She signed quickly, holding her breath, moving away with the end of her signature.

"Don't run off, little lady," the Justice said. "You'll need some documents here to prove that you're married. Let me put my seal here, and you can take a copy of this." He held it up in a menacing fashion as if he had the deed to her ranch.

Rudy had champagne in the car and they toasted one another as they drove home on the dark deserted highway.

They had decided to live in her house, even though his house was newer, and larger. She had settled that issue early on: a woman needed to feel comfortable, and she had lived there since she was twenty-two.

When she and Rudy arrived at her house after the long drive home from South Dakota, she led him to the guest room and turned down the sheets as he looked on. The guest room had been Hank's room. After his death it was her first project. The whole bed, mattress, box-spring, mattress pad, sheets, duster, quilt, the whole shibang was new. It was country, and comfortable. And Grace felt the pleasure anyone would have felt presenting this room to a guest.

"You should be warm enough. There are extra pillows in the closet. And the guest bathroom has plenty of towels."

She turned to leave the room, when he stopped her. He braced his arms against the door frame and giggled like a little boy trapping his sister. "You're not getting off that easy, Mrs. Brown." He leaned down and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "Just sleep with me, Mrs. Brown, why be alone?"

The last thing she wanted was to just sleep with him. Although she wanted to be close to him, she didn't want to share those too close personal moments. She had noticed that she had begun to drool at night, and if he were like Hank he probably snored or moaned. Why wreck a civil respect for one another by sharing these involuntary and crass aspects of body and age?

"I need my sleep tonight. You can understand that can't you?"

"I'll be understanding and patient, but I think you're making a mistake." He moved his arms from the wall and let her go to her room.

In the dark, the only illumination was the clock radio. Grace watched its glowing face. She drifted into a light slumber. The door opened slowly, she could sense it as if from her dream. She felt Rudy's presence. She struggled to pull herself back to the room. To look about. But did she need to? Didn't she know Rudy was there?

"Grace, Grace?" He called in a low, whispery voice.

Now she feared letting herself out of her sleep. Without waking completely, without opening her eyes, her heart quickened, it raced, it pounded in her temples. What would she say to him? What did he want?

"Honey? Grace?" he called as the wolf bays.

She was awake. She must respond. Her breathing was too quick to hide her consciousness. "What? What?" she wished to appear startled.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to alarm you." He had pulled up the chair she

left in the corner. He was sitting just over her. So close.

"What is it? It must be late."

"It's only eleven. You've just gone to bed. You were really tired. It's not fair of me to disturb you." The door was left ajar and a triangle of light fell across the room. He leaned close, so close.

"What is it?" She turned her face up away from him.

"Can I hold your hand, please?" his voice seemed imminently pleading.

"My hand?" She pulled it up and out from the covers and looked at it as if it weren't part of her body. "My hand?"

He latched onto it, grabbing it from the air like the brass ring. He caressed it as if a bird fallen from its nest. He kissed it warmly. He pulled it gently until she released more of her body from the covers. He pulled it gently again, until she raised herself up sitting at the headboard of the bed. He pulled, no, led it across holding it over his lap gently unfolding her fingers, until her hand seemed to be in a desperate splay, readied. He moved his right hand up her bare arm still holding her hand up in the air, in a state of limbo. She looked into the shadow of his face. Once their eyes had locked, communicating a want, he placed her hand gently on his erect penis. He released a gulf of air, the whoosh of it filled the silent room.

Never had she imagined a man doing such a brazen act to her, yet she caressed him as he had caressed her hand, so gently. He leaned his weight up and pulled his pajama bottoms to his knees. He sat down again and she put her hand skin to skin. They looked to each other. His skin was silky soft. It excited her beyond imagination. He rose from the chair and lifted the corner

of her blanket. Carefully, thoughtfully he asked, "May I?"

She nodded not knowing whether he could see her. She watched him lift her covers and step from his pajama bottoms.

He lifted her nightgown and lay on her with lightness and care. He kissed her on her forehead, and slid his mouth down to her cheek. She moved her mouth to meet his. They moved slowly and embraced tenderly and when he entered her, she entered him. It was as if they had slipped out of their bodies and were facing soul to soul. In the morning she was glad to hear him up and out of bed when she awoke.

The week following the ceremony, he began to move his belongings over to her house. They had been sharing the bed in her room, but there certainly wasn't enough room for his belongings. He suggested using the spare room closet for his clothes, and the guest bath for his toiletries. After he left to retrieve another load of boxes, Grace went into the guest bath to look at his things. She ran her hand over the Old Spice bottle, the Crest toothpaste, a container for his partial, and his razor. She lined them up against the wall. She moved to the closet. The shirts were mixed in with the pants and the sports coats. "This won't do." She lined up the shirts, straightening the collars and sleeves. She felt proud once everything was straight, but when she heard his car pull up in the drive she felt a sudden grip of irritation.

"I'm going to put the stuff from my freezer into yours," he called from the back door. She heard his foot steps descending the stairs to the basement.

"I'll be right there." She could see the light from the freezer from the top of the stairs. "Hold on a minute. I'll put things away."

"It's OK, I've got it."

The closer she got she could see that he was putting the meat on the vegetable shelf. "Wait! That doesn't go there!" she yelled.

"Where does it go?"

"I'll do it. I want to do it. You don't know where things belong."

"I know where I belong." He put his arm around her waist.

She closed the refrigerator door. "You're wasting electricity. Put the meat on the table. I want to label everything, and then I'll put it away."

"I didn't mean to make so much trouble for you." He kissed her cheek.

"I want to do this myself. Please, put it down on the table and get your next load of stuff."

She watched him walk up the stairs. When he was out of sight she took the top piece of meat from the table. It was wrapped in white butcher paper. How could she tell what it was? She held the cold meat in her hands. She remembered Hank's ice cold hand. She was not going to put this meat in her freezer. She was not going to let this man move his stuff into her house.

Chapter Eight

Germaine

Germaine woke to the darkness of the new moon. For a moment her mind lingered in a nightmare, and she felt that she was somewhere near the scene of her father's death, or perhaps near his corpse. A whiff of death overpowered her. Immediately, as if melding with her previous thoughts, she believed that she was in a hotel. Had she and her mother decided to travel together after all? But then her eyes caught the illumination from the clock radio. She watched it flip: 4:27 flip 4:28 and she was oriented to her own bedroom. God damn it, why couldn't she sleep the whole night?

She rolled to her back and was unable to tell if Eric were in bed with her. She turned another quarter turn and caught a flash of the white sheet, was it pulled up around his neck, or was it flat, empty? It bothered her that she was unsure of whether she shared the bed with her husband. Shouldn't this be some sort of intrinsic knowledge one possessed after fourteen years of togetherness?

Germaine remembered when her mother confessed to her that she was no longer sharing a bed with Germaine's father. Germaine and Eric had only been married a short time when her mother told her, and Germaine believed that this separation represented the death of her parents' marriage. Her mother insisted that after all of their years together, it simply meant nothing, and that some day Germaine would understand. Grace had told Germaine, "I know everything there is to know about your father, what more can I learn from listening to the same snoring pattern year in and year out?" Germaine had wondered how her mother failed at least to recognize it as a symbolic

gesture.

Now, Germaine couldn't even tell if her husband was next to her. She was afraid to reach out to him and discover thin air. She got up to turn on the bathroom light in hopes of confirming a shadow of Eric. A shaft of light fell across the top half of his body. Oddly he seemed to be leaning out of bed; his hand planted on the floor. His body could not have been in a more awkward position. Surely this wasn't an accident. No one would naturally fall into such a position. Sometime during the night he had, consciously or unconsciously, moved as far from her as possible. She wondered if there was some way not to take this personally.

Cautiously, she moved back under the covers and resumed her prone position, hoping for sunrise. Eric moved to his back, but then seemed to pull himself toward his edge of the bed, sliding his hips and then his shoulders. He never slept on his back, he must be awake. They lay still.

Germaine remembered a couple of years ago when Natalie had gotten a Barbie and a Ken doll for Christmas. Natalie had never asked for any kind of a doll before, and then at ten she wanted nothing more than Barbie and Ken. Germaine believed that Natalie realized she was getting too old for dolls and this would be her last chance. Germaine told Eric that they needed to keep this in mind when they shopped. Eric had the habit of slipping out at the last moment and picking up "little" items. That year his idea of a "little" item was Barbie's entire doll house, furnished.

Germaine remembered that even though Natalie seemed thrilled to open the presents, she never really played with them. The only thing she ever did with Barbie and Ken was to make sure they were seated across from

one another, each morning, at their little table, and that each night they lay side by side in their bed. Germaine felt like Barbie lying next to Ken. Plastic, stiff, arms and legs straight out, not breathing, not moving.

Germaine struggled to concentrate her attention on what she would accomplish that day. Breakfast, lunch, laundry, her therapy session, the health club, maybe some gardening, what else? What else was there?

She decided to lie awake until the alarm went off. She wanted to note Eric's behavior. How would he make it look as though he had been sleeping? But this was insane. He was her husband. If something was wrong she should find out. It wouldn't go away. "Eric," she whispered.

"What," he said as if angry, but maybe he was simply startled.

"Did I wake you?" She was struck by the fear of her questioning. An uncomfortable knowledge of the other being awake stood between them.

"Yes, well not really . . . I guess." He remained still.

A moment of unsettling silence entombed them. Germaine wished that Eric's breathing would fall into a snore, for suddenly she feared seeing his expression. Would it be a loveless stare? Just a few months back, if waking together, they would have touched, perhaps just a pleasant brush against one another, but they would have touched. The first couple of years of their marriage, he might have rolled onto her, or she might have thrown her leg over him.

Now it seemed impossible to talk. When they were first married they spent long Sunday morning breakfasts sitting by the poolside. They would talk on and on for hours: philosophy, art, cooking, love, money, work, the garden, anything, everything. They talked about how other couples didn't

talk. After making love, they would lie in the darkness, fighting sleep just to talk. Of course they didn't always share the same views, but even when they differed, they both had the same moral direction, leading them to respect one another. There was never the sense of 'I'm right, you're wrong', but more a sense of 'yes, I can see your point, although I'm not sure that I can feel that way'. If allowed the opportunity to eavesdrop on their intimate conversations, most would recognize that their debates were spurred by the compelling curiosity of one person to know the interior of the loved one. And most eavesdroppers would understand the eminent compatibility in their natures.

Yet now Germaine was afraid to let one more word escape her mouth as if a flood of regrets would be set forth endlessly.

Dr. Cavitch had said that a common practice among dysfunctional families was for the couple to blame its martial problems on one of the family members: the wayward child, the meddling mother-in-law, the alcoholic father-in-law. She remembered him telling her this as a compliment to how he heard her describe the interrelationship of their immediate threesome, and of their extended families.

But, if Germaine had been truthful, she would have told him that once Natalie came along, she and Eric lost their curiosity for one another. Natalie was colicky. She seemed to cry for hours on end. The weight of this responsibility changed the pace of their togetherness. In particular, Natalie intruded on mealtime and love making to such a degree that these acts "before Natalie" and "after Natalie" barely resembled each other. At times they ate at the kitchen counter in order to respond quickly to Natalie's needs.

Sex became confined to the brief period between bedtime and Natalie's first feeding, rooted in physical necessity.

Then, when Natalie's needs changed enough that they could have returned to their old pattern, their strategies for dealing with one another had changed. They thrived on a pragmatism that only left enough room to concentrate on Natalie's needs and Eric's job. To Germaine, this change wasn't bad. For her, the years since she had Natalie seemed like the best years. They were always busy. They shared their spare time. Germaine always told everyone that she was fulfilled. Perhaps everything had become so comfortable that even a small glitch seemed malignant.

Maybe she should let this go, go back to sleep, quit worrying about how her husband was sleeping; whether he was sleeping. She had, after all, just awakened from a nightmare, of course things seemed distorted. Right now, as they lay in the darkness, physically and emotionally separated by an eerie silence, she could end it all simply by focusing them back to their comfort zone. All she need do was to ask him about his operating schedule for the day, or mention Natalie's upcoming science project. All families were mired in the practical. He would talk; she would talk, and the tension would be gone. But what if he unconsciously moved away and she couldn't open her mouth?

"Is that rain?" he asked.

His voice caught her by surprise and even though she understood his words, they seemed lost deep into the silence. "What?"

"It sounds like rain. Can't you tell if it's raining." He turned his face toward hers.

"I shouldn't think so," she answered in a vague, dreamy tone.

"Listen, that's got to be rain. What else could it be?" His voice cracked with an edge of anger.

"I don't know. I can't tell."

"Why not? For god's sake, listen." He raised his voice and propped himself up on his elbows.

"OK! OK! I'm listening." She lay flat, face up. "I'm listening."

"And."

"And?"

"Is it raining?"

"I said. I don't know."

Eric threw the covers off and got up to look out. Germaine watched his form. Even in the near darkness she could see that the muscles of his shirtless back looked tensed. "Look. I told you it's raining," he said in an insistent tone.

"What of it? What's the point. Even if I said it wasn't raining it would still be raining."

"I only mentioned it was raining. That's all. What's wrong with that?"

"There's nothing wrong with that, but you seemed so demanding. I guess I was sort of dreaming."

"Dreaming nothing, you were trying to start an argument. I can't even wake up without getting into it with you. Jesus, is this any way to start a day. Is this how to send your husband off to work?"

"Eric, I didn't do anything."

"You never do." He climbed back into bed and gave the covers enough

of a yank to leave Germaine partially bare. He turned away from her and mumbled, "You never do."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know damn well what that means." He turned his head toward her and then back away again. The sky was slowly getting light. The rain continued.

Germaine was cold and got up for her robe.

"Yup, that's the way, just leave when you don't feel like facing the problem."

Germaine put her robe on and sat at the foot of the bed facing Eric. "Just tell me what you want to say. I don't want to play games, Eric."

"The thing is," he began, "men don't like to be rejected. They can't handle it."

"Men don't like being rejected? Eric, nobody likes being rejected. Men don't have a corner on that."

"It's different for women." He moved up to a half sitting position. "For one thing, women are rarely in the position to be rejected."

"What? How did you come up with that?"

"Germaine, please be open about this. Can you try to be open?"

Germaine could now see the outline of this face, as the sky brightened. She strained to make out his expression.

"You have to admit that even nowadays men are the aggressors in relationships. They initiate dates; they initiate sex. This gives them a much greater opportunity to be rejected."

"Who's rejecting you?" Germaine tried to rein in her overwhelming

urge to fly off the handle. She told herself to recognize his interpretation as his valid concern whether false or not.

"When was the last time we made love, Germaine?"

"I haven't rejected you. If you fall asleep, or if I ask to move to a more comfortable location, I haven't rejected you. Plus, remember that much of our sex life is governed by your work schedule."

"I don't feel that your assessment of the problem is fair."

"Eric but it's true. Tell me one time that I've said no, when I've pushed you away, when I've said that I didn't want you, name one time."

"You don't have to say no, to say . . . " The phone rang and both of them jumped. "no," Eric finished his statement as he reached across the lamp on the nightstand and picked up the phone. "Hello . . . yes, speaking," Eric paused to let the caller talk. "I'll be right in," he hung the phone up. "I've got to go. Mrs. Jenkins took a turn for the worst. I'll have to take her back to the OR." He got up quickly leaving Germaine still sitting at the end of the bed. From the bathroom he called out, "You've been giving me clues for several months. Your movements tell me that you don't want me." Eric stepped from the bathroom and pulled a shirt from the closet. As he dressed he talked quickly. "As soon as I enter the door at night, I can feel the change. There's no warmth. You give me no warmth . . ."

Germaine got up and walked to the window. The rain continued and the morning remained dark. She watched a lighted channel marker blink at the bend in the Intracoastal. The rain was soft. The waterway flowed smoothly. She couldn't listen to Eric. She would glance from the outside view to his reflection. He whirled around the room, his gestures animated as

he talked and dressed, but the water outside was smooth.

For the past two weeks, Germaine had gone to the spa every morning. She began with a 30 minute step class. In the middle of the routine the instructor would tell them to move their steps to a new position. She always told them, "Remember, keep your head above your heart." This expression would haunt Germaine. It would dance in her head until she believed it was the key to everything in life.

Following the class she would move to the Stair Master. It was positioned in front of the mirror, and Germaine watched herself push down and float up, push down and float up. After a few minutes, her reflection seemed to dissolve; her movements would envelope her, push her deeper into herself. The dream of her father rolled forth, unrolled, unfurled and revealed itself. At first she was struck by the horrible image of her father's rotting corpse, but after a protracted period fixating upon this image, she began to feel comfortable with it. Yes, she was experiencing the truth and horror of the physical world, it slapped her in the face, it woke her out of a sound sleep into the darkness wondering where she was, but despite this sheer terror, it helped her to see the truth. Keep your head above your heart. This epiphany hit her as she rode the machine, as she worked her legs past pain, as her body released the chemicals that clogged her thinking. She began to understand the real nature of her life--no, no, to understand the real nature of life--period. Her father's death could not overshadow his life. His rotting dead body was only a by-product of his life. The events of the past would always be the real thing. He was a man who loved his daughter, sure

it was in the past, in the physical sense he couldn't be loving her now, but it couldn't change; it was as real today as it had been when he was alive. Maybe it was more real, because it couldn't change. If he had lived to be ninety, he might have experienced a dementia twisting his mind to reveal untruths. Maybe he would have called Germaine at odd hours to tell her he had never trusted her, never loved her. But things that could have happened were unreal; only the things that did happen were real. Everything in his life happened, so it was the truth.

Germaine realized that that truth, that lasting truth, that can only be known once a person is dead, of course could not be applied to her, nor to Eric. What would happen to them? What would the truth be? She thought a great deal about what Eric had said to her. What kind of truth was he creating?

Germaine could not escape the idea that Eric held an interpretation of her that was false, totally and utterly false. Eric didn't seem to recognize, or care about, the truth of her. He had even begun to misread her actions.

The display on the Stair Master went blank. Germaine had noticed a woman queuing up to use the machine, but she had wandered off to join an aerobics class. Germaine reset the machine, oblivious to her physical workout. For a while she watched the class. It struck her how different her life was from her mother's. At her age, her mother had watched soap operas, and scrubbed floors. Now women spent their days jumping around gyms and volunteering at their children's schools.

Germaine recalled her mother's bi-monthly ironing days. It was a strict routine, a routine that she probably adhered to until this day. It always

seemed like the most important, the most essential chore a woman could do. But Germaine didn't even own an ironing board. To her mother it was a supreme production.

Grace cleared the kitchen table of its centerpiece; she pushed one of the chairs to the corner. She brought the flimsy wire rack from the basement with clothes hangers still dangling. She flipped open the board, its ratchet sound screeching to Germaine's upstairs bedroom. And then for hours, as Grace turned the garments, Germaine would hear the iron being firmly set down, firmly set, and firmly set.

The rack and table became full: shirts, pants, scarfs, handkerchiefs, sheets, pillowcases all lined up, folded, organized neat soldiers. Germaine could see the exact way her mother would always hang a blouse, buttoning it, puffing up the shoulders, admiring her work before she let it go to its place on the rack. Germaine could see her mother's face; her lost-in-thought expression changing to express a silent conversation with herself. By the end of ironing day, the house was encased in the heat of it.

That evening Grace would always have some new point, some new idea, to express at the dinner table. The dinner would start in the most optimistic, upbeat moods as her mother carefully reconstructed her thoughts for her family. The topics on these nights ranged from whether JFK's Catholicism would effect his presidency, to what the schools were really up to. In retrospect, Germaine believed that these dinner conversations started as debates, but eventually resembled little more than Grace's polemics. Hank would often seem beaten down and become taciturn. If he responded to Grace's goadings it would simply fuel her fire. One night Grace was appalled

that Hank had said, "I know what you're thinking."

"How can you know what I'm thinking?" She asked in the most accusatory voice. "Don't ever say that you know what I'm thinking. No one knows what I'm thinking."

Often, these outbursts led to a reconciliation, a tenderness that lingered on after Germaine was in bed. She would drift asleep to the cooings of "I'm-sorry voices". It was as if Hank would forget that Grace had been fighting with him. That she was chiding, and egging him. That she was harsh and angry. Of all her childhood memories these Walpurgis Nights seemed to be the most telling, yet the least characteristic of their family life. Were these the inevitabilities of a life-long relationship? Germaine gathered that to her mother and father the content of their argument was of little value. That it was simply a way for her mother, no not just her mother, but for both her mother and father to excite their marriage. To add a dimension of conflict and then resolution to their lives together. Was this what was missing from Germaine's marriage? Was she too content having no conflict? Wasn't Eric entitled to more? Was that at the heart of the problem? But Germaine could not escape the perversity of it. Should you fight over nothing, so that you could make up?

There were just too many things going on at once. Nothing was in its place anymore. Germaine remembered reading a book about change. Even though she couldn't recall its title, and would concede that enough years had passed since she read it that it certainly wasn't fresh in her mind, she was certain that the book focused upon the way that major life changes, such as the death of a loved one, lead to disorientation in all aspects of life. Also she

was sure the book had talked about the further disorientation of encountering many changes at once, which was Germaine's case. First there was her father's unexpected death, then her mother's accident, minor or not, then this guy Rudy, who was, even if for a short time, staying at her mother's house, then there were the changes in Eric, not just changes in their relationship, something which she might be able to influence, but actual changes in him.

Germaine felt pressed to do something. As each day progressed, new problems with Eric unfolded, presented themselves inch by inch, in a way that made Germaine believe that by day's end she could no longer hold back and would in fact confront Eric with her increasing anxiety. At times like this Germaine wished that she had a close friend to call. Since selling her business, the year after Natalie was born, Germaine had lost contact with people who were strictly her friends. Everyone that she talked to now was a mutual friend of Eric's also. She didn't want to betray him, but she felt that if she had someone to confide in, it would help. Just a little sympathy. She had thought of calling her mother, but couldn't bring herself to do so. Although Germaine felt that Grace didn't follow her own advice, Grace had once told her that one of the keys to a good marriage was to never say something to someone else that you wouldn't say to your husband.

It wasn't particularly gratifying to Germaine to be caught up in constantly assessing her problems. She wanted things smoothed over. She was trying to focus her thoughts to solutions rather than assessments, when the display on the Stair Master went blank again, meaning that Germaine had been on the machine for forty minutes--twenty minutes beyond the club's allotted time. As she passed the desk heading for the shower, she wondered if

one of the young women attendants would scold her, but they only smiled and nodded.

It was still raining, and Germaine sat in her car a moment to defog the windows. She decided that the rain was gentle enough to allow her to stop at Publix for kohlrabi and fresh pasta without getting too soaked for her 1:00 therapy session. But as things would happen, the rain picked up while she was in Publix so that she arrived at Dr. Cavitch's office wet. The sun room was damp, and the air conditioned office chilled her. Cavitch offered her a sweater, which she took, but she remained uncomfortable.

"How has your week been?" The Doctor began. He was wearing his running shoes, leading Germaine to believe that he had run during his lunch break, even though his shoes were dry.

"Everything is wrong. I don't even know if I should begin. I have problems that are beyond our sessions. Problems that can hardly be enumerated in an hour, let alone addressed." Germaine closed the sweater around her but continued to shiver.

"Wow, that sounds pretty bleak. Start with the most immediate problem. I'll make time for you." He pushed his chair back, opening up his body in a way that Germaine felt did not represent the concern he should be showing.

"My husband can't even stand to be next to me in bed. And then he says that I'm rejecting him."

"It seems tragic that you feel that way, but I'm wondering how you came to these conclusions. How did he tell you that he feels rejected? Can you remember what you heard him say?" He continued to lean back in his

chair with his arms open and clasped behind his head.

"He said that men don't like to be rejected. He said that we haven't had sex because I rejected him."

"Is this true?"

"No, far from it. I've never said no to him."

"Well where did he get that idea?"

"He said that I'm not warm toward him."

"Do you believe that's true?"

"No, I don't believe it, but I will consider that it's possible. It certainly is not intentional on my part."

"OK, we can work with that, but what about your statement that he can't stand to be near you?"

"He hangs off the side of the bed at night. He avoids touching me."

"All right, that sounds like your interpretation. Possibly he's interpreting the same kind of gestures in you."

"Of course, but what's real? How are we going to know the truth here? This is he said, she said."

"Yes, a lot of life is like that, so stop the cycle. There's a clear way to find out who is really being cold here."

"So . . . how's that?"

"Pursue him. Make it totally your move. Come on to him in every way you know how. You make all the moves. See if he's receptive. If he is, than maybe you have been sending unintentional messages. If he isn't, then you know what problem needs work."

By the time Germaine delivered Natalie to the gym, the rain had stopped and the sky had turned ugly. Then as Germaine got ready for her evening with Eric, adding finishing touches to the table, the wind was whipping up white caps on the Intracoastal and there was thunder and lightning heading from the beaches.

Eric came in wet. He lingered in the foyer, probably to carefully remove his coat and shoes. Germaine heard him open the door; could hear him rustling about. It thundered, and the lights browned down momentarily. For an instant, Germaine wished that the lights would go out. She pictured herself and Eric spending the evening in candlelight.

He entered the kitchen. "It's really nasty out there. I considered picking up Natalie on the way home, so we wouldn't have to go out in this later, but the traffic was bumper to bumper."

Germaine stirred the boiling pasta. "Yeah, they didn't predict this one at all. How was your day?"

"Busy. How long before supper is ready?"

"Ten minutes."

"Good, I'm hungry." He kissed her on the cheek and headed off to change his clothes.

Germaine dished up a small plate of pasta for both of them. After they had finished the pasta, she cleared the plates for Eric's favorite Veal Marsala. They ended the meal with a fresh garden salad--since visiting Provence, Eric felt it only fitting for the salad to end the meal. As they ate, Eric told Germaine about his cases for the day and about the patients he had seen in the office. When thunder sounded, he would stop his animated story-telling

to exclaim, "Jesus," and then he would resume the story.

He declined dessert saying, "I'm fine, but a cup of coffee with a little Amaretto would sit well."

Germaine stood over him pouring the coffee while he read the sport's page. She cleared her throat and settled into the seat next to him abandoning her place across the table. He looked up as if to acknowledge this change he seemed like he might say something; but instead, he smiled and returned his attention to the paper. Shouldn't he recognize her change in seating as important? Why did he think she had moved? He must know that she wished some kind of communication. Suddenly even the idea of reaching out to take his hand seemed impossible. With his paper held high, she could no longer see his face. For a moment Germaine believed that she was seated with a total stranger. All she could see were fingertips which could belong to anyone. Everything seemed so unfamiliar. She would have felt more comfortable with a blind date. She knew that if she didn't say something, if she couldn't get him to drop the paper, it would be impossible for her to initiate anything in bed. The newspaper was becoming a sheet of ice. She had to break it. "Eric, we need to talk."

He lowered the paper. He looked puzzled, maybe inquisitive. She turned her chair and faced her husband, looking directly to his eyes. But he averted them, appearing to have a hard focus on some point in space. Often, when they talked, Eric made little, or no, eye contact with her. He didn't need to gauge her responses.

"I feel our relationship is taking a turn in the wrong direction. And it's not just me. In fact, I don't think that it's anything either of us is doing, but

perhaps it's simply that we're misreading each other," she continued.

Eric said nothing, but dropped his head to a bob that moved in the fashion of those figurines with heads attached by coiled springs. For a second, the comic sense of it held Germaine, but then she was overwhelmed by the idea that it was an angry sort of posture, his neck bent forward, head bobbing to say: no, no, no, don't bother me tonight.

"Apparently, you don't want to talk."

"That's not fair." He slowly turned his gaze toward her, but looked up and said "Jesus" when the sky again lighted. His eyes seemed to settle to the right of Germaine, appearing to scout the weather carefully. "Of course I want to talk to you, but as I said this morning there are subjects that are sensitive for me. I don't feel that I want to talk about these things just now. It goes without saying that the pace of my day is quite different than the pace of your day."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Germaine had picked up her coffee cup, but set it down without taking a sip.

"Simply, I'm tired," he said with a long exasperated sigh. "Sometimes you don't seem to understand that I don't have the energy to get into this type of discussion after a twelve hour day."

"I do understand, but we never can get into this type of conversation. And things brew until one morning we wake up and I'm hit with a total surprise. Let's face it, there's never a good time. Never!" Germaine's voice rose, and she consciously worked to regain a steady controlled tone. "On week nights you're too tired and on the weekend you want to relax. Do you really think we can just let this go?"

"We can, for now." He glanced at her and then away. "Firstly, I'll admit I was a bit hasty this morning, I said things that maybe weren't well thought out." Whenever Eric numbered his responses, whenever he began with "firstly," Germaine knew that he was imploring her to pay attention because other points would follow. In Germaine's experience this signaled a departure from all possibility of true conversation, of true exchange; instead, Eric was positioning himself to lecture. It was more a signal to her than his way of organizing the points he wished to make.

"During these hard times," he continued, "I need to keep in mind that you did just lose your father, but most of what you perceive as a problem in our marriage has little to do with our marriage."

"That doesn't make sense." Germaine felt doomed, but could not let it go. "Are you saying that we don't have any problems?"

"Well, actually, we have very few problems. We occasionally disagree on a point, as all couples do, but right now what you see as a problem in our marriage is simply part of the grieving process for your father."

"Eric, that's absurd. Just this morning you laid this guilt trip on me about how I was rejecting you, and how this was some major blow to your ego, and now . . . well, I just don't understand. It seems to me that you're playing around with my feelings."

"I don't blame you for feeling defensive. It's normal, I've seen this type of reaction from many of my patient's relatives--this sort of denial over how all-encompassing the grief process can be. Jesus, look at this lightning." He nodded his head toward the outside.

"Eric, forget the lightning." Her tone was more exasperated than she

wished. "Let me get this right," she said, slowly for emphasis, "you're saying that the problems in our marriage all stem from me, from my problems over my father's death. Is that correct?"

"Yes, and, secondly, if you could drop your guard just a minute, you would realize that that's the case." He turned from the lightning to meet her eyes.

"Are you saying that there is no chance that you're wrong, that unequivocally this is my problem not yours. Is this what you're saying?"

"The problem stems from you, but of course, if you have a problem, I have a problem, too."

"And your problem is only the problem that you're having with me?" She pushed her coffee cup and saucer forward in an angry gesture. She ran her fingers through her hair, changing the part. She leaned toward him slightly and almost whispered, "And what is your problem?"

"Well firstly. . ."

"You already said firstly, why don't you cut the bull shit!"

"OK, if you want me to be harsh, if you can take the truth, my problem is that I have to exercise the patience to get you through this process without me taking your behavior personally." He seemed to smile after this comment, expressing a successful parry.

"Well that's conveniently deflected back to me."

"There you go again," he raised his arms in mock exasperation, "resorting to your psycho-babble instead of allowing yourself to be in a posture of compromise."

"You're totally deflecting the truth. How can I compromise by myself?"

"See. Once again, psycho-babble. You read too many self-help books. Maybe you should stop reaching for catchy phrases like 'deflecting the truth' and concentrate on communicating. Did you ever consider that?"

"Forget this. Forget it! I started off this whole thing to try and understand the bizarre and inappropriate way you've treated me lately. I refuse to let you twist this around. Firstly," she said in an emphatic, hostile tone. She paused and caught his eyes. "Before I can sort any of this out, I need to go back to your behavior a couple of weeks ago." She jabbed her finger firmly on the table in front of Eric, punctuating her words. "I need to know how you could feel justified in yelling at me over Natalie's gymnastic meet."

"I'm glad you brought that up because I sensed that you were harboring hostility over it. I'm sorry if I seemed to usurp some of your parental power, but there are times when someone's irrational and you have to step in to right the wrong. In this case, I acted to stop your unconscious tyranny. I'm sorry if I seemed harsh, insensitive, or maybe inappropriate, but it was the best I could do at the time, and it worked."

"Jesus, listen to you. You're talking down to me. Can't you see that?"

"I can see that for some reason you're construing it that way. Yes."

"There is no point, whatsoever, to this conversation."

"Indeed, that's what I tried to tell you from the onset."

"Answer me this, will there ever be a point to our conversations again?"

"When you're ready to make a point of them."

"Don't you wonder how things got so twisted. We never used to talk

like this. How did this all happen?"

"I see no need to reiterate my sentiments on this. I think I've made myself clear, and that in time you will agree to this." He pulled the paper up to continue his reading.

Germaine felt she should take a different tack. She should go over to him and put her arms around him, and tell him that she loved him. But even as she consciously tried to move her thoughts back to the time in their marriage when they were tender and understanding of one another, she couldn't pull those feelings to the foreground. She viewed Eric as her enemy.

The storm passed and by next morning the sky was clear. This was the type of morning Eric would take Natalie to the hospital with him on Saturdays while he made rounds. He would buy her fries and a coke at the coffee shop which she'd eat while waiting for him. Following their rounds, he took Natalie to the gym. But since the first of the year, Natalie had to be at practice too early to squeeze anything in before it. But today the day was so beautiful that she wanted to go in late, and tag along with him. She begged and pleaded with him all through breakfast.

"Not today, honey. I have so many patients to see. Maybe next week. We can make a date of it. OK?"

"Oh, Daddy, please," she whined. "I haven't had French fries all year."

"I can't today, now don't pester."

By late morning, when Germaine received the call from the gym saying that Natalie had fallen off the beam and that she should probably take her in for an X-ray, Germaine felt that it served Eric right for not taking

Natalie for a treat. He'd feel guilty. Germaine had considered calling Eric at the hospital and having him attend to this problem, but she wanted to be with Natalie herself. So instead of bothering him, as he obviously had a heavy patient load, she phoned Dr. James, Natalie's pediatrician, and agreed to meet him at his office.

Dr. James had an office in the same building as Eric's, just across from the hospital. The office complex featured an atrium which extended from the ground floor lobby to its glassed-in rotunda five floors up. All the suites were sparkling with pastels and clusters of plants; and, although seven years old, never losing the smell of new carpeting and fresh paint. Each floor had a solarium which served as the central waiting room for the group of doctors. There were sweeping views of the St. Johns River from each of these sun rooms, but they were either too hot or the view was obstructed by half closed mini blinds. Today, all the blinds were closed and most of the offices were vacant. Dr. James met them at the reception desk and ushered them into an examining room. Natalie was fidgety. Her ankle was in an ace bandage and she couldn't keep from looking at it from every angle. When the doctor tried to remove the ace she pulled her leg away.

"You'll have to buckle down here. I've got to take a look and you know it. Do you want to remove it yourself?"

"Yes," she whimpered.

Dr. James turned to Germaine, "I guess Eric's been busy. I haven't seen much of him lately. We used to bump into one another in the cafeteria but I guess we're on a different eating schedule lately."

"Hmmm. . .I can't say," Germaine had always found Dr. James' small

talk irritating for some reason, and especially today she just wanted to get the visit over. Dr. James had a thick Southern accent, and a country swagger. He was Eric's choice; when Germaine first met him, she felt that he was a bumpkin--she couldn't imagine that he'd work out. But over the years she had decided that he was adequate.

Once Natalie finished unwrapping her ankle, Germaine believed that it was fine. It wasn't at all swollen, and she wondered if it were just Natalie's way of trying to get her father's attention.

"Let me see here," the Doctor said, as he lifted her leg up by the heel. "Does this hurt?" He twisted it a bit to the left, to the right, then he pushed the toes up.

"Ouch," Natalie yelled out.

"That hurt, hmmm. Well, I don't think it warrants an X-ray, but she has a bit of a sprain. The ace bandage will help and I'll fix her up with some crutches." He wrote on the chart and tore off a prescription. "Here," he handed it to Germaine. "Just take it next door to the hospital pharmacy. They'll fix you up."

Germaine believed that the crutches were unnecessary, the doctor's way of placating a spoiled child. Natalie hopped down the long corridor toward the pharmacy occasionally using Germaine as a crutch. Being a weekend the halls were relatively uncrowded. As they neared the cafeteria Natalie said, "Oh, let's stop in for fries, please Mommy."

"Don't you think we should get your crutches first?"

"Does that mean we can go after I get them?"

"You go wait inside for me. That way you don't have to hop all over

the place.”

She ushered Natalie to a table.

As Germaine continued down the hall, she saw Eric standing in front of an elevator next to a female in a lab coat. They seemed to be chatting warmly, laughing. Eric’s posture appeared unusually relaxed. Germaine quickened her pace to catch up to them, but just then the elevator door opened, and it was all revealed to Germaine. She was paralyzed in her tracks. Even from a distance the relationship between Eric and the woman was unmistakable. Germaine stopped and witnessed Eric put his hand to the woman’s waist, directing her lightly, playfully toward the rear of the elevator. And then, as the doors closed, he leaned over to kiss the woman?

Chapter Nine

Grace

Germaine called at the most inopportune time. When she called, Grace had just told Rudy that she didn't believe things were going to work out. Grace and Rudy were standing in the utility room of the basement and the phone startled them. Rudy was holding an armful of frozen meat wrapped in butcher-paper, and Grace said, "Stop. Hold it. I've had enough."

"Enough? Enough what?" Rudy looked perplexed. He balanced the meat against the inside of his arms. His silver hair was haloed beneath the naked light bulb. The metal table, the only one Grace and Hank could afford when they chose their first kitchen set, now wedged between the freezer and washer, was stacked with the contents of Rudy's freezer.

Grace was struck with the idea that the food would out live them. For a brief moment she imagined them both dead. She pictured their bodies side by side in the cooler of a funeral home while their at-home freezer was still stocked with meat. This idea, although macabre, passed through her mind with whimsy bringing forth a giggle, a shake of her head, but it also brought forward the question of where they would be buried. Certainly not together; they didn't belong together. The whole idea of their marriage was absurd, simply absurd. She needed to call it off immediately. But seeing Rudy with his frozen hands and hunched back standing before her, trying to please her, made her realize the need to temper her response. "Oh Rudy, we have to talk. You're moving your stuff in too fast."

"I thought that you'd want to get this over so that we'd have the rest of

the weekend to enjoy." He looked up at her still balancing the meat. The grayness of his age was accentuated by gray cinder block walls.

"It's not the weekend that I'm concerned about." Despite her wish to hold her sympathy for Rudy at the forefront of her expression, she was propelled by the desire to speak her mind. It wouldn't be fair to do otherwise. "I've barely gotten used to the thought of being Hank's widow, and now I'm sharing everything with someone else."

Rudy's expressions became excited. His face arched up in a look of bewilderment and agitation. Suddenly he seemed to notice the temperature and weight of the meat he was carrying, and he scurried about making a couple of small circles, until he stopped and set the meat on the table. "Well . . . Well . . . I can understand how you feel. It will all take time. I'm sure by next year at this time, we'll be a comfortable old couple. But you're right, this is a major change, especially for you."

"I appreciate your understanding, but you need to know that I'm not thinking forward to next year. I can't see a future for us. I don't know how to say this, other than just to say it, but I don't want your stuff here. I think when it comes right down to it, I'm not sure about you living here."

Grace's first thought was that she was glad that she hadn't dragged this out. She was glad that she had just said what she needed to say. But then, Rudy turned his back and remained silent, and the fear of how she had shattered their happiness overtook her. Rudy had been so damned happy. His footfall was happy. His white frozen hands were happy. His whistling was happy. And now, no matter what she pretended to feel, no matter what she said, she couldn't get his happiness back. She watched his shoulders

curve forward and his head drop, and she believed, by the slight quiver to his back, that he was crying, that he was weeping softly.

To Grace, the most touching situation in the world was a man crying. She could only recall seeing Hank cry once, and that image had seared him to her as nothing else could. Hank was always stoic. When his parents passed away within a year of one another, Hank was only in his early thirties. You could read the grief in his face. He carried that edge of sadness about him, it lingered for more than a year after their deaths. But what got to Grace, what touched her beyond the tragedy of the situation, was when Hank finally wept.

Buttons, Hank's parents' miniature Schnauzer, had outlived them. Hank and Grace were left with no choice but to take the dog in. Who else would want an aging, spoiled, yappy dog? But the dog never adjusted. He whined endlessly. When they finally decided to have him put to sleep, they went together to the vet's office. Grace drove, and Hank sat holding and stroking the dog. Once in the office, they were both sure and matter-of-fact about their decision. Buttons was only a dog, after all, and he was unhappy. But then, to make sure that Buttons was out of his misery, Hank insisted on waiting until it was over, and seeing the body.

Grace thought that the dog looked peaceful, laying motionless on the steel examining table. She was satisfied, but Hank had to pick him up. And once the limp, lifeless body was in his arms, he hugged it as a little boy hugs a stuffed animal. He hugged it and kissed it and began to sob.

Now, as Grace watched Rudy's back she pictured him turning around and revealing to her the anguish of a small boy. But then, at the moment when she believed she might be able to say something to patch some of the

pain, the phone rang. If Grace had been of another generation, she would have had an answering machine to pick it up, or she would have let it ring, but it didn't even occur to her not to respond to the ring. As she walked past Rudy she wanted to turn to see how hurt he was, but she resisted and reached the phone by the fifth ring.

"Where were you?" Germaine asked in an accusatory tone that belied her own troubled state of mind.

"Just downstairs." Grace concerned herself that Rudy would call up to her, or that he would come up the stairs and show his sad face.

"Well, I'm sorry to disturb you, maybe this isn't a good time, but I must tell you something now." Germaine's voice was harsh with a cold straight-forward edge to it. "I need to talk to you as a daughter to a mother."

"Of course, how else would you talk to me?" With the idea of Rudy weeping in the basement, Grace lacked any patience for Germaine's dramatics. She believed that Germaine was about to tell her something she had always meant to tell, something she had lacked the courage to tell, or something that she was supposed to keep secret. Perhaps she would tell her that she had sneaked out of the house when she was young, or that she had never liked the way Grace wore her hair, or, God forbid, that she had found out about Rudy. Germaine's tone was unreadable. In fact, after Grace heard Germaine's speech, she realized how inappropriate Germaine's tone was.

"Eric is having an affair," she blurted out.

Immediately, Grace felt wedged between the horrors that had befallen her in this brief period of time. She no longer wished to be sympathetic, or understanding. She wished to hang up, run to her car and drive off. She

pictured herself and the car as an evanescent image.

"Mother? Are you listening?"

"Yes, but actually, this is a bad time after all."

"Didn't you hear what I just said?"

"I'm sort of in the middle of something here."

"Mother, what are you saying. I mean, what could you be doing? You were down in the basement."

"Germaine you can't drop a bomb on me like this and expect me to respond immediately, I need to digest this."

"The coast is clear for me to talk now. Natalie sprained her ankle and she's just dozed off. I need to talk before she wakes up, and before Eric comes home. I don't know what to do." Germaine continued in her detached tone, as if telling Grace the bus schedule.

"Are you sure of this? How do you know that Eric is having an affair?"

"Mother, I caught him with someone."

Grace paused. She knew she needed to respond, but Rudy seemed so completely silent and she couldn't imagine what that meant. "You know there is a difference between being with another woman and having an affair."

"It's someone he works with. I doubt that it's less than an affair."

"Maybe it doesn't mean what you think. I'm sure he still loves you and it was just a mistake."

"Oh God, when did you become so liberal." Germaine's voice finally took on an edge that matched her words. "Whose side are you on?"

"I'm on your side, but your marriage is important also. You made a

lifetime commitment and so did he. And I'm sure you can work things out."

"But I don't want him. I don't think I can even talk to him."

"Germaine, you don't throw away years of marriage over seeing your husband with someone else. You just don't! What do you think you're going to do? You have a daughter and it's your responsibility to hold it together."

"Why is it my responsibility?" Her pitch skyrocketed. Grace could picture Germaine's wide-eyed facial expression that mirrored her voice.

"It's always the woman's responsibility."

"Mother this is the nineties. That's a ridiculous, sexist, counterproductive attitude."

"Call it what you like, but it's the truth and will always be the truth as far as I'm concerned. Woman hold families together. They swallow their pride, work harder at pleasing their husbands, and in the long run get what they really want."

"I can't believe that you're not even trying to help me. I can't live with a man who cheats on me and that's that."

"You can live with a man who cheats on you. You were before you found out and you can continue. It's that simple and the sooner you realized that the better off you'll be."

"Fine. That's just fine. Don't support me at all. But I'm just letting you know . . ." Her voice let go to a crystalline shatter, and there was a long silence. "I'm leaving Eric! . . . and . . . well, I guess . . . I'll let you go."

Germaine hung up before Grace could say another word.

Grace sat in the kitchen with the phone dangling from her shoulder wondering about Rudy. Shortly the phone began to squawk. As she slowly

turned to hang it up, she heard Rudy's feet softly dragging up the stairs. How would she face him?

She was surprised to hear his steps quicken as he approached the top of the stairs. Emerging from the basement he appeared a renewed man. His face was solid, but not pained. "Who was that?" he asked in a quieted voice.

"Germaine."

"It sounded like serious news. Is something wrong?"

"She says she's leaving her husband."

"Does this run in the family?" he asked in a casual tone.

Grace wondered if he had decided not to take her seriously.

He stood over her and twisted his head down to look in her eyes. "Can I pull up a chair." He pointed with his head and expressed the question in his eyes.

"Of course, sit."

He pulled a chair near hers and sat down. She hoped that he wouldn't come close enough to touch her. She didn't even want the fabric of his trousers to touch hers.

"This is all very serious, Rudy. Very serious."

"Is it?" He took her hand and looked it over as he caressed it. "You know, I've been thinking, and I don't really believe that we have a problem."

"Oh, Rudy." She saw a profound yearning for happiness in his eyes and wanted to oblige.

"I put all the meat on a separate self. And if you don't mind I'll leave it there for now. You know I don't have to move in here lock, stock and barrel. I'll even stay at my house until the time is right."

She felt she should give him the truth: they would never have a marriage. But she couldn't, yet. "I would feel more comfortable if you stayed at your home. Yes, that's a good idea."

"OK, that's settled. What are we going to do about Germaine?"

Chapter 10

Germaine

Germaine decided to arrest her childish behavior once and for all. This desire to be more mature, to be in control, propelled her through the weekend without letting on to her knowledge of Eric's affair. She had anticipated a scene with Eric and felt childish energy welling up. She had imagined a showdown with him, had pictured herself as victor, knowing what a childish notion this was. She recognized that this was the time, the definitive time, for her to take charge. So, just after noon on Monday, she began perusing her collection of self-help books with renewed determination. Where had she read that a person could either be right or happy? God, she needed this kind of guidance now. And she would, indeed, find what she needed. She would find it, and she would find it without undo complication. She remembered reading how everyone possessed the ability to rid themselves of unwanted behavior. She would get hold of her behavior before she spoke to Eric. She would not be made a fool.

She stood before the bookcase in the study and took down books in systematic order, making sure that once she had paged through one and determined that it was not the one she sought, she wouldn't mistakenly pick it up again. Her back arched pulling her muscles tight as she moved through the selections. When she took a book from the shelf, she placed a hand on her hip and held the book open in the other. Once engaged in reading, her gaze was one of peaceful concentration, as if reading poetry. But then she would start biting her nails and stop her reading; she would have to

concentrate, focus on calling her attention back to her purpose. When she determined that she had the wrong book, she slapped it closed, and with marked irritation, replaced it.

The study was hot. Along with the guest room, and the guest bath, it was the only room on the south side of the house. Often these rooms became so beastly hot about midday that Eric suggested buying mini-blinds and keeping them closed. Once the blinds were installed the whole family seemed to avoid them, preferring to be out in one of the rooms which pulled in the sunlight. The study had become a room for an eclectic collection of junk, a perfect place to hold unused things.

Unlike the other rooms, it was furnished in antiques. It had a desk that no one used, an antique console-style radio that really didn't work, bookshelves of varying sizes and from varying periods, old cabinets and armoires. Germaine and Eric had picked up these antiques at different shops and antique barns during Natalie's gymnastic meet weekends. During their empty hours, in strange towns, while Natalie was warming up, Germaine and Eric would scout the out-of-the-way places. Both of them enjoyed antiques, despite the fact that the items they bought would never find a real place in their clean-cut industrial house. Once delivered, they would move the item around from corner to corner until they gave up trying to make it fit, at which point the antique was either banished to the study, or the garage. If it ended up in the study, the item really wasn't of any use to them; if it ended up in the garage, it might, someday, serve as furnishing for that Minnesota lake cabin Eric had promised to look into buying someday.

When they first began collecting, Eric was drawn to old books--useless

books, really, many of them reference books from the nineteenth century, all of them containing out-of-date information. Eric liked the look of them, the sense of history, and picked several up religiously, on every trip, until, without explanation, he started collecting old photographic equipment instead. His change-of-heart left many shelves unfilled.

Seven years ago, when Natalie first entered school full time, Germaine amassed her own cache of books hoping to fill her hours of freedom with self-improvement. At that time, she read the books with the prejudiced idea that self-help books contained information that was more obvious than enlightening. And yet it was her year to improve, so she would breeze through the books looking for little tidbits of value. She recognized her tendencies toward selfishness, her tendency to feel sorry for herself, to be more in-tuned to her own needs than her daughter's or her husband's. She believed that her change would simply be a matter of shifting her view slightly. It all seemed so possible, until she began to fear she was getting more self-absorbed, spending too much time with her problems. She closed her books only to later seek therapy.

But there were a couple of passages she would find now. One of these books, she was sure she recalled it right, made perfect sense to her. All that would be necessary for Germaine to discard her childish behavior was to compartmentalize her problems and cull them, simply set them aside until the behavior became unused, and, hence, easy to be jettisoned. The metaphor the writer of the book, a Ph.D., in psychology, chose to illustrate the freedom of shedding this excess baggage was that of space travel. In order to make it back to Earth, it was absolutely essential that the traveler jettison his cargo.

Clearly it was an image of floating, and freedom, but Germaine couldn't imagine for one moment that she would feel free confined to a space ship that was under the control of a group of men on the ground. Germaine remembered with clarity her resistance to this metaphor seven years ago. She had seen through the naive image, and the controlling psychologist who wrote it. But that wasn't the point today, the point was to find what would be of value to her and get on with it. Yet it all became muddled. The longer she stood in the hot room, the more it all seemed a waste of time. Her waning enthusiasm left her tired and listless and without much forethought she headed for the family room couch.

Germaine was never one to watch afternoon TV, but she lay with the remote in her hand, trying to find something to anesthetize her. She recognized the theme song to her mother's soap opera and left the channel on. She watched the exquisitely dressed actors, and despised herself for spending her day in Eric's oversized T-shirt. On the show, a female actor answered the front doorbell only to discover her ex-husband. Germaine wondered if, when she and Eric became divorced, he would ring the doorbell. Would he ever stop by? Germaine pictured herself greeting Eric unexpectedly. She would be cool; she would not become immobilized by wayward, uncontrolled emotions.

On Saturday when Eric returned from the hospital, to learn of Natalie's injury, Germaine was relieved to have this imminent problem to address. She was relieved when Eric showed no sign of guilt or suspicion when she told him that she and Natalie had been in the hospital tracking down crutches. She would not step into the trap of wanting him to suffer, or of

making him feel the need to watch his back and cover his tracks. Her suffering would be private, mature, a learning experience. In fact, this would be a chance for her to grow.

The woman in the soap opera was standing close to her ex-husband--unnaturally close. They stared into one another's eyes with dispassion, the camera focused back and forth between their eyes until the scene faded to a commercial.

Germaine knew she had dozed; the angle of the sunlight had transposed the family room from harsh noon to an early evening glow. She wondered how late it was. She turned to the set and saw Dan Rather. God, she had supper to fix. And wasn't she supposed to drive Natalie home from school? God, Natalie was on crutches. Germaine sat up with a start, and tried to come to terms with her lost hours. Oh no, she was still in her T-shirt. She hadn't even showered after her morning workout. How could she go anywhere? Face anyone? Why hadn't Natalie called? Check the message machine. It was blinking; she hadn't heard it. She played it back. Natalie's high-pitched voice was calling out, "Mom, Mom. Can you hear me? Pick up the phone. I've been waiting for 40 minutes. All the buses are gone. How could you forget me?" she shrieked.

How would she get in contact with Natalie? Where would she be? Never before had she shirked her responsibilities so.

She sat on the edge of the couch paging through the phone book, flipping through various sections looking for the school's number. The new layout of the phone book frustrated her more than ever. The school wasn't listed under its name. She couldn't find a heading for it under government

offices. She settled back into the couch, and felt defeated by every aspect of the situation. She imagined Eric in an examining room with his girlfriend. In this image, Eric was smiling. Germaine pulled her knees up under her T-shirt.

She threw the phone book to the floor, dialed 411. The sound of a male voice asking, "Which city please," startled her. She hung up the phone and stared at the TV set. A woman was talking about a neighbor who hadn't taken out the garbage or cleaned her apartment for a year. "We can't believe it," the neighbor said. "They looked so normal. I believe she's a nurse. Her son attends Harvard or Yale or some good school, but he comes home for the summer, and for break."

"When were you first alerted that there was a problem?" the interviewer asked.

"We've had problems with rats in the neighborhood, and there was that horrible odor, but no one thought it related to them. They kept to themselves, but they seemed pleasant and normal when we saw them leaving the house. Why would someone do such a thing?"

The camera cut to a picture of the small home. There was waist-deep garbage. Workmen stood atop the rubble wearing gas masks. Germaine's first impression was that she couldn't wait to tell Eric about this bizarre story, but then it struck her that she would never tell Eric this story. Nor would she tell him that she had spent the day immobilized because of him. She would need to cover up her abandoning Natalie. She couldn't tell him that she felt deserted by her mother. Was there anything left?

Germaine pulled herself together after Natalie phoned saying she had walked to Julie's house. Germaine told Natalie that she had a flat tire, and was stranded on the highway. After satisfying herself that Natalie was calmed, she readied the kitchen for supper.

Eric came in the door yelling, "Honey? Honey?"

Germaine didn't remember him calling her honey before. In fact, she couldn't recall what endearing nicknames he had used for her. "Honey?" she questioned. Was the endearment normally reserved for his girlfriend?

"Germaine?" he walked into the kitchen smiling. He approached her straight on, and she felt as though she should veer. But she stood her ground and he stopped in front of her and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing, you just surprised me." Yes, she was surprised, surprised hearing him call her honey. But more accurately she was hurt. She looked at his face to read any clues, to see if guilt registered. The familiarity of his face overwhelmed her with longing. She'd never deny that she loved him.

"I'm sorry." He gazed past her and seemed to smile at the idea of supper. "You're in a good mood."

Why, after all these years, was he still unable to interpret anything about her? "Yeah, well, why shouldn't I be?" she said trying to hide the sarcastic undercurrent.

He held her by the shoulders and kissed her cheek lightly.

A wave of sadness checked her from responding.

"Where's Natalie?" he asked, raising his face in an inquisitive gesture.

"She's over at Julie's . . . for the night."

"A school night? When did this new rule start?"

She turned to the stove to stir the vegetables, they had turned limp from over cooking. It was too late to rescue them. The dolor of her night after night cooking coming to an end, being banished from her life, overpowered her. Her wrists became limp and she wished to never stand before this stove again; and, at the same time, she wished only to stand before the stove.

"I'm asking you a question," he said with the firmness he often applied to Natalie.

"Yes, you are." She turned the flame up under the snow peas and shitake mushrooms. She looked over her shoulder and repeated, "Yes you're asking me a question. You are questioning me. And I'm not in the mood. I'm not in a good mood at all."

"OK, I can see that, but you're not going to get out of this so easily." He turned and flapped the paper down on the table. He walked toward the bedroom, loosening his tie. "We had an agreement that we would not make unilateral decision concerning our daughter, and you're not going to break it," he called from the hall.

The oil burned away over the high heat, the vegetables adhered to the pan. Smelling it, Germaine lifted the pan, turned off the gas, and slammed the pan back down to the burner. "Too bad, I already broke it," she said knowing that perhaps he heard her, or perhaps he didn't. She thrilled thinking he had. She could hear him rifling through the drawers, slamming the closet doors.

He returned to the kitchen looking as though he was ready for a tennis date. He only played tennis occasionally, usually when they were vacationing

at Hilton Head, or Marco Island, but he always chose Wimbledon-style clothes for his summer wardrobe. This evening he wore tan, crisply pressed cotton slacks, and a little blue polo shirt. He carried a white cable-knit sweater. He entered the kitchen in a whirl, tossing his sweater over his shoulder.

Germaine had abandoned the cooking. A dinnertime aroma lingered, but the food was scattered about the room in different stages of preparation.

Germaine had pulled a dining room chair to the French door and was looking down the waterway. A boat was out-of-sight, but its wake remained, kicking up water that lapped at the marsh's edge. As Eric neared, his Sperry boat shoes scuffing lightly against the tiles, Germaine turned to watch him. He walked about the kitchen with purpose. He cleared the counter near the refrigerator putting the milk and lettuce away. He turned on the faucet to wash the garbage down the disposal.

At the last minute, just before Eric arrived home from work, Germaine had changed her clothes, pulled back her hair, and put on a bit of make up. She had chosen a thin, sleeveless, black dress that fell to mid-calf. The look she had hoped for was sedate. She hadn't had time to shower, to primp, to set a fine table, to pull the meal together, but this wasn't a night to go overboard. Because of this, she found Eric's shower-fresh look, a look she usually loved, irritating. No not irritating, irritating was too mild. She was incensed looking at him. It was more than a matter of looking out-of-place, too upbeat and sporty for the evening, it was a matter of being incapable of seeing their problems, acknowledging their problems, reflecting their problems. It became clear to her that he was totally removed from her feelings, from her state-of-mind, from their marriage.

"Where is Julie's phone number?" He faced Germaine. She believed that she saw a hint of surprise in his look. He probably hadn't realized that she had been watching him. This seemed to motivate him to stand up straighter, to rally an on-stage demeanor. He always appeared proud and confident.

"It's programmed on the phone." Germaine hoped she had said this with detachment.

Eric held the phone to his ear and turned his back to Germaine. "Honey, you know you can't sleep over on a school night. . . Well, maybe Mommy wasn't feeling right today . . . What??? . . . She didn't?? . . . OK OK I'll be right over to get you. Be packed up and waiting. See you in a bit Sweetie." He pushed the antenna down into the phone and returned it to the wall. He stood before Germaine, his scuffless, over-white, canvas shoes tapping out a rapid pulse. "You didn't pick Natalie up from school," he said as if asking a question.

"That's right." Germaine lifted her gaze from Eric's shoes to his eyes. His eyes were wide.

"My God, she's on crutches. What were you thinking?" He looked at Germaine with anticipation of an answer. "What were you thinking?" he yelled.

"What was I thinking? What was I thinking?" Germaine yelled back. She rose from her chair and pushed it up to the table. "Well, geez, Eric, what do you think? What do you think is wrong? What could possibly be wrong?" She wandered about the table waving her arms, pushing the chairs in and out. "Maybe I'm pissed. Maybe I'm fed up. Maybe I know you're

having an affair." Germaine turned quickly from the table and headed down the hall toward the bedroom.

"What? What? What kind of craziness? What next?" he yelled.

She slammed the door to the bedroom and sat in the rocking chair. She didn't lock the door, hoping he would notice and realize that she was not crying. She pulled her knees up and crossed them in the chair. She breathed out counting to three and breathed in counting to three. She could hear Eric approach the door.

"Listen don't twist this around to me." He was at the door, but he didn't try the handle. "You've made an egregious error. It's your responsibility to take care of Natalie. That's your primary responsibility. For Christ's sake she's on crutches. What if I shirked my responsibilities? What if I left a patient bleeding on the operating table? . . . Germaine, answer me. God say something. I have to pick up Natalie, she's waiting."

Germaine didn't hear Eric walk away, but she heard the car pull down the driveway. She sat in the chair facing away from the window. The room was lit by the remnants of the set sun. She pulled her ankles into a lotus position. It had been years since she meditated, and even though she had never experienced the benefits she had hoped for, now she felt the urge to control her breathing, to relax. She exhaled for three counts and then inhaled for three. She focused her energies between her brows. She needed her mind to calm. Everything could fall apart otherwise. That idea, those words, played out before her over and over: Everything could fall apart--repeated with the rhythm of her breathing until, finally, a thought gripped her and she couldn't let it go. She needed to remember what she had said to Eric and what he had

said to her. She unfolded her ankles and got up to stand at the window.

Twilight was nearly gone. Past the form of a tree, through a Y in a branch, she focused her attention to a blinking channel marker. It flashed and flashed and flashed and she imagined the light rotating in a socket. She pictured it as the beam of a search light scanning the marsh. What had Eric said? She began to pace about the room, biting her nails then running her fingers across her hair. She had accused him of cheating, hadn't she? What exactly had she said? "What exactly did I say?" She opened her hands as if gesturing to someone. "It's so important to remember. Why can't I remember." She stopped and looked at herself in the full length mirror. Anyone would classify her behavior as frantic. Her hair was twisted, her face contorted. "It's important," she said to herself in the mirror. And then it all seemed to stop. She watched herself, looked past her image to the light outside. "What am I doing?" she asked, raising her brow in a questioning expression. "Natalie will be coming home to a dirty kitchen. Get control."

Natalie would certainly sense trouble if she walked into a mess. Germaine would have to clean it up before they got back. How long had Eric been gone? She headed toward the kitchen in a panic, "Jesus, the table is still set. First, I'll clear the table."

She started loading the clean dishes into the dishwasher. With the table cleared, she dimmed the light over the table and believed it was all under control. It looked as though they had just finished a calm, reasonable meal. Germaine had often felt that everything seemed in proper order when daylight waned and the kitchen smelled of the evening meal.

The cutting board was covered with chopped vegetables, the burnt food

still in the pan, when Eric and Natalie walked in. Germaine looked up, as she bent over the dishwasher, and smiled at Natalie. Natalie looked angry. Germaine felt horribly aghast by Natalie's steely look. How long had Natalie sided with her father? Germaine straightened her back and had an urge to walk away, to leave the whole mess.

"And what's your problem, young lady?" Germaine asked.

"Why did you leave me at school?"

"How many times has this happened? Tell me that before you talk to me in that tone."

Natalie shrugged. She look frail. She was so pale. She looked so small drowning in her fashionable over-sized clothes.

At that moment, Germaine became convinced that she shouldn't have named her Natalie. She bore no resemblance to a Natalie. A Natalie should be dark and sturdy. She wondered how other people predicted their lives so well. "Answer me?"

"Well maybe if you had forgotten me before, it wouldn't have been such a surprise." Natalie's eyes were red from her allergies. She wiped her finger under her nose. "It wouldn't have been so awful."

"I didn't do it on purpose, Natalie. Instead of thinking of your discomfort, didn't you even, for one moment, worry that something had happened to me?" Germaine looked to Natalie for any sign that would show a capacity for sympathy, but she could only recognize self-absorption. Had she become her mother's daughter?

"Well, even Daddy's mad. He's mad at you and so am I," she said as a much younger child would taunt a sibling.

Eric walked up behind Natalie. "Leave your mother alone. Come on, let's go in the other room and look over your homework."

Natalie turned from her mother in an angry pivot. Her pony tail twirled in the sassy motion it often made after a perfect dismount from the uneven parallel bars.

That night Germaine rolled to the edge of their bed after being awakened by Eric's tossing. She was left with a nightmare replaying too quickly for her to analyze it. Her father had left Grace behind in the house that had been in the nightly news, the one overflowing with garbage. Her father was driving away. Germaine couldn't decide if this was based on a real incident she was recalling. From the way this replayed, she was unsure if she was in the house or observing this from an omniscient position. But she was clear that she was bereft, consumed by utter desertion. In a moment of fear she rolled back toward Eric. She lay her hand gently on his shoulder. He seemed to shoo it off, as though a fly. He turned to face away from her.

"Eric," she whispered. "Eric."

"What? What?"

"Wake-up."

"What?" he began to pull himself from the covers. "What is it?"

Germaine rolled toward her night stand and turned on her light.

Eric covered his eyes. "Jesus, what's wrong. What is it?"

"I need to talk."

"What time is it?"

"It's 2:00."

"Germaine, this is insane. I have to work tomorrow."

"Insane. Insane, Christ you hit that on the nose. Eric, I saw you getting into an elevator with a woman. And it was clear that your relationship with her was more than professional."

"What the hell?"

"I saw you bend to kiss her."

Eric sat on the edge of the bed. He turned over his shoulder to look toward Germaine. "You know, Germaine, I don't know what changed you, but you've ended up being one of those women who only fabricates a life."

"What? What a horrible thing to say. What have I fabricated?" The word "fabricated" stuck in her throat and came out into the air in a heavy, horsy tone that made Germaine feel distant from herself. "Listen, maybe I misread your state-of-mind."

"Eric, answer me this, how should I react to my husband cheating on me?"

"This is all a reaction to your father's death. I can see that now."

"Stop! Stop this now. You mean to say that you're not cheating on me. Is that right?"

"All this craziness started when your father died, you know." He shook his head slightly, indicating pity.

"What craziness? You started to have an affair?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're full of shit." Germaine got up and turned to Eric. "When you're having an affair, you should at least have the balls to admit it." She left the room and slammed the door. She decided to sleep on the couch. Eric

didn't come after her and she took this as an admission of his guilt.

Dr. Cavitch seemed younger than usual. Germaine believed that he had put on some weight. His face seemed fuller, less drawn.

"Thank you for working me in," Germaine said as she sat down.

"What's up?"

"Well," she turned to the window and choked back any urge to cry.

"Eric's having an affair . . . I want to leave him."

"An affair, this is a complete surprise. You've never hinted at him being unfaithful. When did this all transpire?"

"I don't know." She ran her fingers into her hair and left them holding a lock in midair. "I only just found out."

"How?"

"Already I'm sick of talking about it."

"I can understand, but it's what you came to talk about."

"Of course," she glared at Cavitch.

"Let's begin with something else, then." He rolled back his chair and leaned into his knees.

"I'm sick of talking about my feelings. Yes, to tell you the truth, I'm really sick of this." She turned away as a child ready to pout. She thought of herself as Mia Farrow in a Woody Allen film. She seemed like an ethereal, self-absorbed woman, and she was sick of it. "I don't know how I got here, how this all happened." She looked at him. "When we were first married, I was so sure. You know how that feels?"

"I think I know what you mean. Yes."

"I'm not talking about being meant for each other, nothing like that, but some days, my ideas of myself were clear."

"In what way."

"Oh I don't know. Just working, chores, and being with Eric, the whole thing worked."

"What did you do that was different?"

"Planning our house, and going out with neighbors--his colleagues, vacations, visiting my parents, it all seemed fun. And now I'm so sick of just thinking and talking about problems. I don't know when or how it changed. I can't remember the last time I talked to someone and just talked about things. You know just talking about a movie, or the fabric on the chair, or anything. I don't think I ever want to talk about my feelings, or problems again."

"I understand, and I sympathize, but you know that's unrealistic."

"How much of our time do we spend talking about our life, and how much of our time do we live it?"

"Germaine, you can't separate the two."

Germaine drove away unsure of what Dr. Cavitch had said. She stopped at the travel agent and bought a ticket to Minneapolis. From the travel agent's she called Marsha and arranged to have her chauffeur Natalie, prepare meals, fill in for her. She told her travel agent, "My saving grace is Marsha. She's working on a nursing degree part-time. I know she must be busy, yet she can always arrange her schedule to fill in for me. She's a gem."

Germaine couldn't give Marsha a definite return date. She told her

she would be back before school was out. That was only two weeks away. But Germaine had no intention of returning, really returning. Of course, she would make a quick trip back to get Natalie set to join her.

Germaine stopped at Ivey's department store. She needed shoes. In the parking lot, she was certain it was the exact same spot she had parked in with her father. Once again she pictured him in the car. What would it be like to be home without him, alone with her mother. She could see her father's head nodding a slow yes. "Difficult" was the word she was sure he meant to relay. But she and her mother really did get along. They could travel. She'd take her mother to places that were hard to get off to when her father was alive. They might plan a real trip together.

In the store the sales woman emerged from the back room with her arms full of boxes. She had "taken the liberty of choosing alternatives." Germaine didn't want alternatives; she wanted to get her shoes and be on her way. She looked up at the woman believing she would tell her to mind her own business, but once she made eye contact with the woman, she realized that she had been so absorbed in buying shoes that she hadn't even looked at her. She hadn't realized how young and sincere she was. She was only trying to be helpful after all.

"Thank you, but I'll just take these."

The saleswoman just stood still.

"I'll take these."

"You're not going to try them on?"

"No. They're fine."

"Here's your receipt," the woman called to Germaine, but Germaine

headed for the door. A man bumped against her. Germaine pushed past him and rushed to her car. She got in, clenched the steering wheel and called out, "I'm leaving. I'm leaving."

Chapter Eleven
Grace

Grace was in the vegetable section of the supermarket, eyeing some plums, when Helen called to her from the other end of the aisle. "My Lord, Grace, where have you been hiding?" she sang out.

"Helen, please."

Helen hurried toward Grace pushing her cart over the bubbled, skid-proof, rubber mat. "I wouldn't buy them," she said as Grace placed a plum back on the pile.

"And why not?" Grace immediately felt irritated. Why did Helen always insist on offering her advice?

"They won't be good for another couple of weeks. It's too early."

"They ship fruit and vegetables from half way around the world. I'm sure the buyer knows what he's doing."

"Have it your way. But mark my word, they're not ready. So where've you been hiding?"

Helen pulled her cart right up next to Grace's. With the carts side by side other customers could not reach the plums. It was early enough in the morning that the store was uncrowded and their lingering and chatting probably wouldn't be a problem for other shoppers, but Grace thought it was just like Helen not to give common courtesy a second thought.

"Germaine is here," Grace responded. She knew she had to tell Helen that Germaine had left Eric, and she felt that she should mention something about Rudy--she was sure that Helen had noticed his car--but she was struck by dread and anxiety just anticipating Helen's questions. She felt queasy and

her palms became slippery against the metal handlebar of the cart. She pulled them from the bar and slipped them into her pockets searching for a Kleenex.

"Germaine? Really? How nice." She cocked her head and smiled a smile that didn't appear quite sincere. "Is she with her family?"

A young woman with a toddler in her cart edged around the twosome. She stopped only briefly and viewed what they were blocking, but pushed on as though she weren't interested; but, nevertheless, she acted a little perturbed. Helen glanced up and muttered, "Young mothers are in too much of a hurry nowadays."

"Young mothers?" For a moment, Grace feared that Helen was talking about Germaine.

"That girl," she nodded toward the woman and grimaced. She then unbuttoned the top of her red and black checked, flannel shirt to reveal a tank top and more cleavage than a woman decades younger should be showing. She smoothed her shirt over the top of her flowered leggings. Grace noticed that nothing matched in Helen's outfit, yet to Grace the biggest fashion sin was that the flannel was too late for the season, and the tank top too early.

"I'll bet that granddaughter of yours is getting big."

"Germaine didn't bring her."

"Really?"

"No."

"So what's the occasion? I suppose you invited her so you could introduce her to Rudy."

"No, that's not it at all. Why did you say that?" Grace knew that she had gotten herself into a corner and would have to tell all. She considered

feigning sickness, but then began to shore herself up for the task of letting someone else in on all of her demons. She reached up behind her hair and twisted her neck in her hand. Every muscle seemed to tense and she wondered how all these problems had descended on her almost overnight. Why was it that Helen only needed to be concerned with her décolletage?

"Gee, I'm sorry if I upset you, but I was only kidding. It just seems like I've been seeing Rudy's car around a lot." She reached across her cart and patted Grace's hand.

Grace pulled back her hand and tensed her fingers on the other hand into a fist. "To tell you the truth, Germaine has left Eric, or so she says."

"Oh, no, I had no idea. Gee, honey, you could probably use a drink-- someone to talk to?" She raised her face.

"There's nothing to tell. Germaine isn't staying and I doubt that she's leaving Eric permanently. All marriages have their ups and downs."

"Yes, we had our share, didn't we? But I never left Sal, and you never left Hank."

"Yes, well, everything's different for Germaine. She's not us. Our generation was a lot different than this one. I don't know about your Mary Beth, but Germaine is into this power thing. It's constant materialism. Everything's got to be the best. How's she going to afford that lifestyle without Eric? And Natalie has everything she's ever wanted."

"I know, there weren't as many options for us as there are for these kids. We never thought of leaving our husbands because frankly we had nowhere to go. But then there's more to Germaine than you probably see right now. She'll surprise you. People change when

they have to. I'm sure that you've done many things since Hank died that you never thought possible. Have the same faith in your daughter."

"Oh, I'm sure she's very capable. She's been wielding her power since the moment she got in the door. Calling banks, lawyers, schools for Natalie. She's at home snapping orders right and left. I don't know, it's just hard to listen to her. She hasn't talked about her feelings, or Eric's, Natalie's-- sometimes it's hard to believe that she's my daughter, my Germaine."

"Surely you understand how tough things must be for her now. Underneath it all, she's still Germaine. She was always a good daughter."

To Grace, these were not words of comfort, but rather words from a woman who would always flaunt her daughter's doting tendencies. Her daughter's tight-knit, warm family. "Well, it may seem easy to you, but it's all very, very complicated. And whatever comes of this, Germaine is only staying until Natalie finishes the school term. A couple weeks. Then she claims that she'll have the logistics of her breakup figured out. We'll see, but it won't be a pleasant two weeks, that's for sure."

"I know. This was not what you needed now, so close to Hank's death. I certainly don't want to make light of this hard situation, but Mary Beth is up at the cabin by herself this weekend--opening it up. The kids are working and Jim's staying home with them. Anyway, why don't you and Germaine come up with me? Kind of a girls' weekend. Mary Beth would love to see Germaine, and I think it would be great for all of us."

"Frankly, I doubt that Germaine would be up to it, but I'll ask. Give me a call."

When Grace came in the door, Germaine was on the phone. The phone was attached to the end of the kitchen cabinet, as it had been since Germaine's childhood. Grace and Hank had decided on this location because, with a long cord, Grace could talk on the phone while standing at the sink. However, in order to sit down and talk it was necessary to pull up a chair. Grace remembered Germaine as a teenager sitting on the counter and talking. When Grace would enter the kitchen, Germaine would jump down and pull up a chair. She always seemed to be able to react to Grace with a mixture of rebellion and compliance.

Germaine's back was turned away from Grace, but as soon as she heard her mother enter, she turned and nodded an acknowledgement. There was something in the way she raised her eyebrow that spoke of condescension. And then she turned her back and huddled over the receiver as if uttering her deepest secrets.

Grace walked past her daughter, set a grocery bag on the counter, and returned to retrieve another. Just a week earlier, before she knew that Germaine would be invading the house, Rudy had come over to help her remove the storm windows from the breezeway. It was the end of May, but it felt more like the end of June. A warm breeze pushed through the breezeway from the south, and, for some reason, the sun seemed higher than Grace remembered it normally being in May. Oh, but how much did she remember from year to year? She stopped for a moment and let the breeze push against her face. Last year--yes, just last year--Hank had removed the storms. Why hadn't she thought about that when Rudy was here? Instantaneously, Hank's hands came to her. She could see them holding a storm window.

She could see his wedding ring. She could see the way his veins ran, and the way the skin wrinkled across his knuckles. She could see his hands at seventy-eight. She could see them at twenty-five. She missed them. She wanted them back. She wanted Germaine to go home, so that she could cry in peace, live in peace.

"Can I give you a hand?" Germaine yelled from the kitchen.

"Finish your conversation."

"I'm off," Germaine said as she walked into the breezeway. The breeze caught her hair and she pushed her fingers through it and held it straight back.

"Who was that?" Grace ignored the idea of meddling, after all she needed to know Germaine's plans.

"It's just a guy I met on the plane."

"For crying out loud, Germaine, you're a married woman and you gave some guy your number?"

"He gave me his card. He might be able to get me a job. That's it, mother. He's married too. Come on let's get the groceries, my hair's getting all snarled."

Grace walked to the garage door. For the first time in several months, as she reached for the doorknob, she thought of the day she discovered Hank dead. She felt like describing that day to Germaine. She considered the benefits of forcing Germaine to see other problems, but decided that she didn't want to break down and cry in front of Germaine. As she opened the door she said over her shoulder, "Does this mean that you're planning on moving back to Minneapolis?"

"There would be advantages to being here." She slid past Grace and took a grocery bag from the car.

"Have you thought this out?"

"Here, take this. It's the lightest one." She handed Grace a bag and picked up two to carry. "I know Minneapolis. And you're here. I could help you out." As they headed into the breezeway Germaine shook back her hair, fighting the wind. "Can you get the door?" she asked Grace.

Grace opened the kitchen door and stood back to let Germaine in. "What about Natalie?"

"It'd be good for her. She could really get to know her Grandmother."

"You can't just plan on taking Natalie away. She has a father you know." Grace emptied the bag and was folding it up neatly.

"You should buy the cloth bags, Mother."

"I recycle these."

"The cloth bags are even better." Germaine was stacking the freezer side of the refrigerator. "Anyway, I'm not just running off with Natalie, I'm just exploring my options."

"Have you explored the option of returning to Eric?" Grace wiped down the counter top and patted it with her hand--her typical gesture signally satisfaction in her work.

Germaine stood with one hand on her hip and looked at her mother impatiently. "You'll never understand how it feels to be betrayed."

"Oh, really? And what makes you think I can't understand that?" In an instant, Grace was ready to let her guard down. All her years of acting out a perfect marriage seemed less important than letting her daughter continue

to believe that she was the only person who could suffer.

"Daddy was next to perfect."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"I lived with him for twenty years. He was always there for you, for us. He was always easy going and kind."

"Germaine you knew him as a father only. You didn't know him as a young man."

"I knew him when he was Eric's age. And I don't remember the things in Daddy that I experience in Eric."

"Well, if your father was more perfect than Eric, maybe I was more perfect than you."

"I'm not cheating. I'm not having an affair. Never have, never would."

"You've probably contributed to his in other ways."

"That's crap. This is the last thing I wanted and I'm not taking the blame. Believe it or not, I'm a good wife."

"Then don't give up so easily."

"I appreciate that you have my interests in mind, but really you can't understand. This is not one of your soap operas, it's really life. I can't tell you how devastating it is to see your husband with someone else. I just can't explain how this whole thing feels, but it's more than that. It's one thing after another. It's all changed. You'll never know."

"Germaine, listen, I don't want to paint a bad picture of your father, I can't imagine a better husband, a better father, a better man. But we were married for nearly fifty years. Do you really believe that you could know our

marriage? It was private. You're not giving us much room for complexity. The idea that he was only involved with me and our family is not the way it works. People leave behind their families daily and go out into the world a different person than the one at home. For God's sake, Germaine, he was in the war. He was away from home for almost two years. He didn't know if he would survive."

"What is that supposed to mean? This is so crazy. I've heard you nag him about this, but don't dump this old baggage on me, and then have the nerve to say you don't want to paint a bad picture of him. Frankly, I'm not listening."

"But you want my ears open for your problems. Is that how it works? That one way street is fine when you're a child, but you're all grown up and I'm sick of hearing how perfect Hank was. What about me?"

"Why are you trying to ruin my image of my father. Isn't it good that I see him as a model husband and father? Isn't that how a daughter should look at her father?"

"Yes, yes, but use him as a real life model for your husband. We all make mistakes. Your father did. Your husband did. Now work to put it back together. Believe it or not, I kept our marriage together and maybe that's what enabled your father to look so perfect."

"Well if you're trying to say that Daddy had an affair, I just don't believe it."

"Believe what you want, that's not the point."

"What's the point?"

"Quit feeling so betrayed. Grow up."

"Well, that's turning the tables. My husband's cheating on me, and you've tried to turn this around to your marriage. If I'm betrayed, I have the right to feel that way. Don't I?"

Grace walked from the kitchen with control and purpose. She couldn't remember her daughter ever being as selfish and self-absorbed. She wanted to bite back with a cruel remark, but caught herself. The screen door slammed.

"Sure walk out," Germaine called, and headed to the living room.

Grace entered the garage with deliberation. She walked to the far shelf and pulled down the box. Her initial reaction was to look about as if the corners of suspicion could linger after someone has died. She recalled the times she would retrieve the box when Hank was alive. She could feel the edge of fear she had felt carrying it in front of her, shielding it by her body, as she headed to the bathroom to lock the door and contemplate the importance of its contents. She would run the water. Fill the tub, and slide into its hot water taking care not to get her hands wet. The box would be set next to the tub, and she would slide the top off. And there beneath the picture of Germaine, beneath the little mementos, beneath a picture of Grace leaning against Hank while sitting on the dock at their cabin, was a letter. Wrapped inside the letter was a picture of a baby. A stranger really, except that the letter said: Dear Hank, I know this is a shock. I know that it is unfair of me to write and tell you this, but this baby girl, this perfect baby girl, is yours and mine . . .

. . .

Grace had always felt lucky that she had prepared herself for such possibilities. She had looked for telling signs in Hank when he returned.

Other wives and girlfriends of GI's had spoken in abstract terms of other women they had heard of whose men had returned and confessed that they had, out of fear and loneliness, sought other women. Grace didn't, for a moment, believe that Hank was above such a thing. When he called her Margaret one night, she didn't even mention it to him. It was over and forgotten. He was home. But a child?

When the first letter came, addressed to Hank Knutsen, postmarked London, she knew right away that it was from this Margaret. She didn't feel the least bit guilty intercepting it. The letter would only trouble Hank, delay his transition to civilian life. What could he do about this woman thousands of mile away, anyway? But a child made everything different. Why should Grace have told Hank; he could never be a father to this girl. Plus, he had a legitimate baby on the way to worry about.

And what purpose would it serve now to tell Germaine of some long lost half sister? Jesus, what was she thinking? What kind of revenge was she considering after all these years?

Grace was startled by the phone. She quickly slid the box back to the shelf. She pushed it back against the wall and turned to run and catch the phone. The ring stopped and as she left the garage, Grace heard Germaine use her formal, polite voice. Grace prayed it wasn't Rudy.

"No. Oh no," Germaine was saying as Grace entered the garage. She looked tense and concerned.

"What is it?" Grace asked.

"I'm so sorry."

"What is it?" she asked again.

"I'll tell her, yes, yes." Germaine hung the phone up.

"What's happened?"

"It was Theran. Clarence died last night. They took him to the hospital because he had chest pain. Shortly after they got there, he arrested and they couldn't get him back."

The music was prerecorded and at times it seemed to drag; it sounded warped. Grace had suggested that Theran hire the church organist, but she said everything was too overwhelming to worry about such details. Grace wondered if the music was bothering Theran. She sat in the front pew, flanked by her two farm boy looking sons and their plain, practical wives. Theran, plump and short, still looking more German than American, sat erect, her hair clipped to the nape of her neck, her ears flapping out from thin sprigs of hair. She was wearing a heavy, black, wool dress and in the afternoon May heat and humidity, she perspired. She dabbed her neck, her brow, and then her eyes. From time to time her shoulders rose convulsively, but she never dropped her head. She stared forward at the coffin and then at the priest. When the service ended and people filed past the body, Theran remained in the pew with her sons. Once the chapel was cleared and the mourners were milling about outside, Theran walked up to the coffin, supported by her sons. She began to sob uncontrollably. She howled. She screamed, and was virtually dragged from the room by her boys.

The other mourners moved quickly to their cars. Theran was carried, literally carried, by her eldest. He carried her as a groom carries a bride. She appeared limp and childlike in his arms.

Even though Rudy had begged Grace to ride with him, had given his solemn oath that he wouldn't give away any trace of their relationship to Germaine, Germaine and Grace rode with Helen. Helen had chattered all the way to the funeral home, but remained quiet on the drive to the cemetery. Grace couldn't remember when Helen had been so silent. Finally, Helen cleared her throat and choked out, "I've never seen anything so sad. My God, he's been sick for how many years? Why didn't she prepare?"

"You can't prepare. You can't."

"That's not true. We all do in some sense."

"I don't want to get philosophical, I just want to get through this day," Grace blurted out.

At the grave site, Rudy sat across from Grace. She tried to avert her eyes. Rudy had only known Clarence casually. They had met at the Seniors' Center, before Clarence took so ill. Rudy looked like a casual mourner. Grace had lived on the same street with Theran and Clarence for most of their lives. Their children had gone to school with Germaine. Grace didn't want to seem inappropriate. She tried to focus on the words of the priest. She was struck not by Clarence's death, but the waning sense of Hank, of his memory. He was gone. Rudy sat living.

Everyone stayed to give parting words to the family. No one seemed to duck out. Grace stood in line behind Helen. She looked past Germaine for Rudy, but she couldn't see him.

As friends and family approached the boys, they extended their hands for three vigorous pumps. They were unemotional. Theran would grab a hand and accept an embrace without words. She pulled Helen to her; they

hugged. Grace was prepared for Theran's embrace, but she stopped Grace from moving. "Grace, Grace," she said in a morose tone as if singing a dirge. "Grace," she whispered in Grace's ear. "Clarence told me . . . just before he fell asleep . . . that night . . ." Theran put her lips closer to Grace's ear and whispered in her stiff German accent. "It was as if he knew he had to tell me then, as if he knew it was his last opportunity. He said, tell Grace that Hank knew about the baby. Hank wanted to tell you for all those years. He wrote to the child. He supported her." Theran moved her lips from Grace. She grabbed Grace's hand and patted it. She smiled oddly as Grace moved away.

Next, Theran pulled Germaine to her lips. She whispered so quietly, Grace couldn't hear one word.

Grace and Germaine walked down the hill to join Helen. Grace was angry at Hank. She stopped herself from turning to Germaine and telling her dark secrets. She stopped herself from turning to Germaine and saying, maybe now you know. But what had Theran told Germaine?

As soon as they reached Helen's side, Rudy walked up from behind a tree. Grace wished he would put his arm around her. If he did she would cry. Grace thought how sad it was that all of these women were left to stand alone during their worst hours. She looked to Rudy and recognized an old comfort in his eyes. It felt like the familiarity of a glance from Hank. How could she confuse the two? She wanted to tell Germaine and Helen to go on without her, but Germaine snarled at her, "What was Theran referring to, Mother?"

"Oh please, not now. We'll talk later." She turned to Rudy. He smiled. It seemed sexy, titillating. Perhaps it was because she stood before her secret husband in front of her daughter. Or possibly anger for Hank would

drive her to Rudy.

"Not now? Theran thought it was the right time." Germaine seemed to be wearing her selfishness proudly. Couldn't she remember she was at a funeral? How oddly out-of-place she looked with arms akimbo, and that look of admonishment.

"Germaine, I'm not going to give in to your outburst, just hush up."

Rudy touched Grace lightly on the forearm, and she returned his smile, but cocked her head to suggest to remember where they were, yet Grace could only concentrate on him.

Germaine stepped in front of Grace. "Hush up? You're embarrassing me. Come on, I want to get out of here. I want to know what's going on." Germaine was whispering stridently.

"Well, I guess you'll have to wait. I'm riding home with Rudy. Germaine meet Rudy." She turned to Rudy and felt proud introducing such a handsome man to her daughter.

He extended his hand. Germaine ignored it.

"Cut it out, Mom, I want to talk." Germaine looked around nervously as if she were going to really get into it.

"You'll have to wait," Grace said firmly, with control.

"This is stupid, there's something important going on that I need to know about. Jesus, it was so important that Theran couldn't wait until after her husband's funeral to tell me. Now what's up?" Germaine was demanding.

"I can understand your confusion," Grace tried to sound reassuring. "But I need to talk to Rudy."

"Mom, I'm your only daughter. Your only family. I don't think you can afford to ignore me now."

"I'm sorry, but I'm riding home with my husband." Grace took Rudy by the arm and pulled him away. They headed up the hill. Grace had an urge to giggle. The pressure, sadness, the whole unbelievable situation, had passed to a feeling of freedom.

Chapter Twelve

Germaine

Germaine felt justified not dressing in black; after all, she was out-of-town, unprepared. She wore a tan blouse over brown silk pants. Both her mother and Helen wore black. Grace sat stiffly in the passenger's seat of Helen's car; Helen drove and was animated as she talked, and turned, and took directions from Grace. Germaine sat in the back twisting her wedding ring around her finger. Helen chattered on and on to Grace. Somehow the scene, the idea of going to a funeral, seemed more real than when her father died; it almost seemed more painful. At her father's funeral, Germaine felt removed and numbed by the whole scene. She remembered thinking that it was the first time she realized what people meant when they used the expression, going through the motions. At her father's funeral, her pain was more physical than emotional; she actually felt as if someone had beat her. Her stomach was tight, and she felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her.

Now, she was depressed and emotionally saddened. She pictured her father as he would have sat in the driver's seat. She could see his white hair, and the arch of his neck. She thought, by rights, it should have been him driving to this funeral. He should have outlived Clarence; Clarence had been sick for so long. At her father's funeral, Clarence had cried openly. At the time, Germaine thought that his tears were the only thing that made him look alive; he was so pale and sunken.

The drive to the graveside seemed even more trying than the drive to the funeral. Germaine wanted to cut out. If she had had her own car she

would have. The sound of Theran shrieking, and the image of Daryl, her son, nestling his head into Theran's neck, sobbing, as he carried her to the car, was hideous. Germaine kept her head bowed throughout the graveside service; she didn't want to catch sight of Theran, or Daryl. Daryl graduated a year before her in high school, and she couldn't bear to see him emotionally reduced. Grace sat still and composed next to Germaine.

Germaine lined up behind Grace to offer her condolences. She was surprised that Theran chose her mother, over everyone else, to whisper to. Theran and her mother were not that close. Her father had been close to Clarence, but Theran seemed to keep to herself. She could hear Theran tell her mother something about the night Clarence died. She was sure that Theran had said something about Hank. When her mother moved on, Germaine was prepared to kiss Theran's cheek. As Germaine reached out her arms, Theran pulled Germaine to her and whispered, "Talk to your mom about what I told her. You're old enough to understand and help. Your mother is going to need you."

Germaine pulled back and looked at Theran, "Yes . . . and you, you need your sons." Why was Theran chastising her? She was there for her mother.

Germaine followed Grace to Helen's side under the shade of an elm tree. Germaine felt troubled by Theran's remark. She felt that she had been slighted as a daughter. Didn't her mother give her the credit she was due? She looked at Grace and said, "Mother, what did Theran mean? Do you know what she was talking about?"

Grace was gazing about at the other mourners. A man, a friend of her

mother's and Helen's, walked up and joined them. "I don't know. I frankly don't understand," Grace said, smiling at the man and further acknowledging his presence by squeezing his forearm.

Germaine looked briefly at the man, and then turned toward her mother to continue the conversation. "Mother, what was Theran referring to?"

"We'll talk. Not now." Grace dismissed her by turning back to the man and smiling again at him.

"Not now?" Germaine was angry. How could her mother brush her off like that? "Theran thought it was the right time."

"Germaine, I'm not going to give in to your outburst, just hush up."

"Hush up? You're embarrassing me. Come on, I want to get out of here. I want to know what's going on."

"Well, I guess you'll have to wait." Grace said with firm commitment. "I'm riding home with Rudy," She turned to him and smiled again.

"Germaine meet Rudy." Grace looked at Germaine as if this man were someone Grace had been talking about, as if Germaine should know who he was.

Germaine shook her head at the man and turned back to her mother. "Cut it out, Mom, I want to talk."

"Well, you'll have to wait." Grace said this in a loud voice that cracked her usual, prissy demeanor.

"This is stupid, there's something important going on that I need to know about. Jesus, it was so important that Theran couldn't wait until after her husband's funeral to tell you. Now what's up?"

Germaine caught her voice and toned it to a whisper. She twisted about as she spoke to verify that the others hadn't gotten wind of their family problems. Helen stood passively, looking uncomfortable.

"I can understand your confusion, but I need to talk to Rudy." Grace resumed her normal composure.

"Mom, I'm your only daughter. Your only family. I don't think you can afford to ignore me now."

"I'm sorry, but I'm riding home with my husband." Grace took Rudy by the arm and led him off.

"Helen?" Germaine turned to Helen who seemed to have a prankish smile on her face. "What the hell? Did you hear what Mother said? What did she mean?" Germaine raised her hands in question. She turned. She wanted to call her mother back, but the twosome was almost down the hill to the line of cars.

"Believe me, I haven't been let in on this one. I know she's been spending time with Rudy, but I didn't know anything about it getting serious."

"Helen, this can't be. Mother cannot be planning on marrying that guy. Jesus, Daddy's only been dead for what? Seven months. Who would ever believe that she could think of marrying again? Why didn't you think to call me when she started seeing this guy. When did this all start anyway?"

"Honey, I'm sorry, but I can't get inbetween you and your mother anyway. You'll work this out."

"My parents were together nearly fifty years. She could never, never get anyone who would even come close to being as good as my father."

In the car on the way home, Germaine tried not to appear as though she were fuming, but she remained silent. Helen reminded Germaine that everyone was meeting at Theran's. "I'm sure your mother will be back soon. She made a hot dish to take to Theran's. She certainly will be there. Mary Beth is coming after work. I'll walk down with her."

Grace didn't return home, and Germaine stayed at home waiting to hear from her.

When Mary Beth called and invited Germaine up to the cabin, Germaine felt relief hearing the voice of a girlhood friend. She was sure it would be comforting to have a weekend away. She looked forward to the drive up north with Mary Beth; she looked forward to commiserating with someone who could understand. Grace hadn't returned from the funeral until after midnight, and Germaine was fed up just thinking about how much hell Grace was putting her through. She had wanted to call Eric for comfort; she had considered calling Dr. Cavitch. But now she saw Mary Beth as an out.

Driving out of town, Germaine told Mary Beth, "It was like waiting up for a teenaged child, except that she didn't come into the house with even a hint of contrition. Here she had humiliated me at a funeral, referred to this stranger as her husband, whatever the hell that was supposed to mean, and she walks in like nothing had happened. She said, 'Gee, you should be in bed' and walked straight to her room and locked the door."

"You two haven't talked since then?"

"I was so mad the next day. I can't tell you. I tried to be civil at the

breakfast table, but just the idea that my mom sat where Daddy always sat, pissed me off. I don't know, I just left. I just go up from the table and said 'That's it. I don't know what's going on, but it's not right. Maybe you buried Daddy, but you can't bury his memories.' I went out, and drove around, and decided to join a spa. I bought a week's pass to the Sports and Health Club. I worked out for four hours. When I got home, my mom had her whole wardrobe out and was ironing."

"You two. I can't believe it. You mean to say that you're coming up here without talking to your mother?"

"Well, I know when to avoid her. I went to my room and listened to her slamming the iron around. I remembered the wrath of her ironing days, and I stayed clear. That evening she came upstairs and informed me that she had a date and not to wait up. This morning when I left, she was still asleep, so I left her a note."

"You two," Mary Beth shook her head as she drove. "Well, it may not be the mother/daughter relationship of the year, but boy you can sure tell that you're your mother's daughter."

"I'm not taking that as a compliment."

"It's just the truth."

Germaine had expected Mary Beth to step to her side and commiserate over having a widowed mother, over being wedged between the problems of an aging parent and the problems of adolescent children, the problems of balancing the old and the young with their own lives and relationships, but it was clear that Mary Beth would hold her guard, for now. Germaine had hoped to tell Mary Beth about her separation; she wasn't sure if Mary Beth

knew and now she wondered if Mary Beth would understand.

They took the cut off from the highway just north of Duluth. It had turned out to be a bright, blustery day. It began with a mugginess, and the skies looked threatening, but the dark weather moved off early. By the time they made the turn off for the lake, the bright sun filtered through the birch and pine and Germaine felt quieted and enthusiastic about seeing the cabin again. She had been up there once before when she was eleven or twelve.

"Do you remember fishing from the dock?" she asked Mary Beth.

"I remember trying to get the fish off the line."

"Those damn bullheads. We smashed them against the dock until we were sure they were dead."

"Yeah, then we cut them off the line."

"Do you feel up to fishing?"

"Oh, I don't know what I feel up to. I can't believe how familiar this road looks."

"There's not much building up here. My dad wanted a remote location, and he got it. There's still only three other families on the lake."

The cabin had been remodeled; it was nicer than Mary Beth's house in Minneapolis. They had swung by her house on the way up because she had forgotten to let her cat out. Seeing the pay-off for Mary Beth's years of adulthood saddened Germaine. Although clean and orderly, her house was dilapidated. Germaine could tell that Mary Beth held up her end of the chores, but that her husband didn't hold himself to his responsibilities. The repairs, painting, and yard work had been ignored. There were a couple of

cars and engine parts scattered about. Mary Beth seemed proud to tell Germaine that both John, her husband, and Jeff, their son, were rebuilding cars from the ground up. The house seemed old, shut-tight stale. It was furnished in Helen and Sal's cast-off furniture, heavy dark Mediterranean style from the sixties. The pictures that lined the dark, narrow TV room showed Jeff in football gear, Jennifer with friends, and John balding and beer-bellied. Germaine couldn't get over how much older John looked than Mary Beth.

The cabin, on the other hand, was modernized. It had a log cabin facade, but inside it was sparkling with light, natural wood. The kitchen looked brand new--new appliances, glass cabinet doors, and decorator tile counter tops. The living room had a stone fireplace on one wall and a wall of windows facing the lake. The deck off the front extended down to the dock and had three round circles cut out to accommodate trees that grew straight through it.

Mary Beth headed to the waterside French doors, unlatched and opened them. "God, I miss this place over the winter. We come up for Christmas but that's it." A breeze came off the lake and a slight fishy smell wafted through the living room.

Germaine stood in front of the window and admired the view, while Mary Beth unloaded the car. When Mary Beth came in with the last bag of groceries, Germaine turned and felt remiss. "Here let me help."

"Sure, get our bags. I'll unpack the groceries."

Germaine came in with the suitcases. "Am I going to be in the kids' room?"

"Either one's fine." Mary Beth was balancing a watermelon and opening the refrigerator door.

Germaine set Mary Beth's bags inside the adult bedroom and walked down the hall to the other room. This was the room she had shared with Mary Beth all those years ago. It too had been remodeled. It was now paneled in cedar and had new Andersen casement windows, but the furniture was the same. A small pine dresser in the corner and a double bed with a metal bed frame. And it even had the same chenille bedspread. Or was she remembering this spread from their cabin on Lake Pokagama? Suddenly all those summers came back to her. Germaine could see her father on the dock, his white legs exposed for those few times that he swam each year. He had taught her to swim; both her mother and father had reminded her of this often, but she couldn't remember them teaching her. But she knew the patience that Hank had. She could imagine him cradling her belly down in the water, and then gently letting go without her even noticing. Without noticing. That's how it happens, how it all dies and fades.

Germaine ran her hand across the pattern of the bedspread. Had her mother had a chenille robe or was it Helen? Where had it all gone? Germaine wondered what would come back to Natalie when she was an adult. She spent more time in the gym than she did anywhere else. Was she deprived of important memories? One thing Germaine would do this summer, one thing for sure, would be to take Natalie away, not to Disney World, or Busch Gardens, or Kennedy Space Center, but to somewhere in nature. A place that would force them to build memories of the two of them: of the three of them? She remembered how Grace would breeze through the

cabin on the first day of their vacation and get everything settled so that they could enjoy the week. Hank would be calling to her, "Come on down to the water. Come on. How can you wait?"

"It will be so much better when everything's settled," she would call. One year he sneaked up behind her and pulled her out of the kitchen all the way to water's edge. They laughed the whole way, and well into the night. It was a family time, but also the time when Germaine most felt like an outsider. Oh, but it left a strong message about adult relationships. A message that Natalie hadn't received, Germaine was sure. No matter what she and Eric were doing, Natalie felt free to interrupt, or finagle her way around him. Germaine could picture Eric and Natalie at home. It would be quiet for both of them without her. Germaine wondered who Eric was talking to over supper now that she was gone? He hadn't called her once in the week she was away. She had talked to Natalie twice, but she seemed distracted. She claimed that Daddy missed her, that he had said so himself. Germaine guessed it was true.

Mary Beth poked her head in the door. "Want some lunch?"

"What do you have in mind."

"A veggie sandwich, some pasta salad, and a glass of wine."

"Make that two glasses for me."

They carried the deck furniture up from the shed. They wiped it down quickly and carried out the food. It was closer to suppertime than lunch, almost 5:00, but the sun was setting late and they decided not to live on clock time.

There were no boats on the lake, and their voices seemed to carry on

endlessly through the pines. Little chickadees and nuthatches flitted back and forth, and a gray jay landed on the deck railing and watched them eat. "My dad used to feed the Jays right from his hand," Mary Beth said.

"Yeah, he sure had a way with birds."

"I find it incredibly sad how all the men on our street are dying off. Now with Clarence gone and your father. Remember what great guys they were. I mean really. They always watched out for the neighborhood, the women and kids, and each other," Mary Beth said.

"Yeah, we don't even know our neighbors. We hire someone to fix any problem that comes up."

"Well, John's pretty good. He's around. He helps people fix things, but he's pretty much glued to the TV. Football, basketball, hockey, golf, sitcoms you name it." Mary Beth swatted a mosquito and held up her palm with the remains intact. "First one. I guess they're not too bad yet."

"I'd almost forgotten the drawbacks of the cabin."

Mary Beth took the wine and filled Germaine's glass and then filled her own. She tilted the rim to Germaine's. "To the longest friendship I've had."

"Almost forty years."

"At least." They smiled and laughed and both took a large gulp, encouraging each other to chug just as they had when they took their first drink at age twelve. Mary Beth poured more. She had been a tall girl as a child. She reached 5'8" in junior high. Both of her parents were short, and of course that made her seem taller. Now, she could be described as big. She had never taken off pounds after her pregnancies, and had added a couple

each year. But she carried it well, and was still a dark haired beauty.

"You were blessed with the most beautiful skin," Germaine said to Mary Beth after she finished her second glass of wine. "You don't have a wrinkle," she added sincerely.

"You're one to talk. You have the body of a twenty year old."

"This is old person's talk isn't it?"

"Gee, I thought it was sort of affection, possibly avoidance of more painful topics." Mary Beth was eating quickly as she spoke. She held a forkful of pasta at bay over her plate waiting to finish her sentence. "Oh God, I almost forgot." She jumped up and ran to the living room to get her purse. She came back filing through pictures. "Look at these." She held out prints of the two of them standing in front of the original cabin. Germaine looked so small next to Mary Beth.

"God, look at us. Look at the cabin."

"Yeah, nothing's the same. Here, look at this one."

It was a picture of their parents posing on the dock. "I don't remember my parents coming up here."

"No, no, no. That's your cabin."

"So it is." Germaine poured herself more wine. She looked closely at her parents, at her father. "God, he was a perfect man, wasn't he?"

"He was a sweetie, all right."

"You know," Germaine stopped and swigged down another glass. She felt she should check herself before she said something careless. She was well aware that she had drunk too much, but this was her old friend. "You know my mom tried to hint that my father had an affair."

"Hank? No. I'm sure your mother wasn't hinting that."

"You know my mom, she refuses to let me have problems of my own. If I tell her I have a headache she does too. If I say my bank made an error on my statement, so had hers."

"Oh, I think you're being hard on Grace, she just tries to be empathetic."

"Really. Is that the opposite of unsympathetic?"

"Come on, your mom has always been a caring, sympathetic woman."

"In general, but when you really have problems, she's not there for you."

"Well, I guess at our age we're more mother than daughter. I guess we need ourselves and our husbands to provide us with the mothering we need. We both have our own responsibilities as mothers. Just the fact of giving to our own children fills our needs. Don't you think?"

"My goodness, Mary Beth, I don't remember you being so altruistic. I remember when you ran away. I remember how you stomped around in my basement complaining about how your parents didn't care."

"Germaine, I've gotten over that."

"Of course, I didn't mean to imply that you didn't, but your mother was always snooping through your stuff. She never trusted you. Has that all changed?"

"I gave her reason not to trust me. It was a problem for us. It was a problem I had to get over, and now my job is to make sure I don't have those feelings for my daughter. Or even for my mom."

"Yeah, now that our moms are widows, it's hard to know what to

expect. God, your mom dresses like a teenager, and my mom dates like one."

They both laughed. Germaine pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. She flipped her hair to the right. She looked cool and casual in a pale green silk skirt and tank top. Mary Beth sat up straight. Although she was solid and carried her weight around her middle, making it easy to hide, her gestures made one feel that she was indeed self-conscious of her extra pounds. She was always smoothing her pants over her thighs and pulling her shirt from her abdomen. She wore her hair almost as she had in high school, and although she no longer back combed it, it was still clipped just below the ears, and layered.

"Hold on." Mary Beth jumped up and put a record on. "I found this the last time I was up," she called, walking back to the deck. "Crazy" by Patsy Cline started to play. "Remember when my mom played this over and over that summer we were here?"

"God, yes. Remember the night your mom and dad went to town and we turned on that song and danced."

"Yeah, how we fought over who was going to be the guy." Mary Beth opened another bottle of wine.

"I remember taking turns and each time we put the record on we would describe how good looking we were as guys."

"Yeah, We'd say, I look just like Paul McCartney or Steve McQueen or Robert Redford."

"You really believed that you'd meet someone rich and famous," Mary Beth said.

"So did you."

"Maybe, but you did. You got everything you dreamed of."

"I did? What makes you say that."

"You've got everything. Look at you. You've got a handsome husband, a perfect daughter, a beautiful house, all the money you need. God, I'll bet you never have to worry about paying bills. I'll bet you can go out and buy anything you want. If you wanted a diamond tennis bracelet, I'll bet you could go right out and buy it."

"That hardly interests me, Mary Beth."

"Well, it would, if you had to worry about paying your bills, if you had to deny yourself . . . God . . . I don't know . . . everything. Gee, when do you think was the last time I got new shoes, went to the beauty parlor, joined a health club? You breeze into town and you've already joined one."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound arrogant. Money buys things . . . I guess even freedom. I won't deny that I like it, but things happen. Relationships . . . well they feel the strain of . . . of responsibility. It's hard when you have options."

"I know the argument. And you're right, I don't have to think about what to wear in the morning, or what to do with my time, or where we'll go on vacation, but I'd love to experience that kind of problem."

"I agree, but just because I spend my life in better surroundings, doesn't mean that my troubles feel smaller, you know? People will say, what's her problem, she's got everything. But pain is pain."

"I didn't mean to be insensitive. My mom told me that you were having problems, and it was hard for me to understand. I guess I was hoping you weren't going to jeopardize what you have."

"There's more to life than what you have."

"Yeah, but I'm talking about a long relationship, and a family."

"But why am I jeopardizing them? Why am I getting the blame?"

Once again the record had come to an end, and Mary Beth went in to shut it off. The sun had set, and the mosquitoes were getting thick.

Germaine stacked the dishes on a tray and headed in.

"I guess supper is out of the question." She stopped in front of Mary Beth, and laughed hoping to lighten up their conversation.

"Oh, I don't know. I was at least considering some pie, and a little night cap." Mary Beth followed Germaine into the kitchen. Mary Beth turned on the radio, her son's boom box, which they had perched on a stool in hopes of receiving a station from somewhere. All they could pull in was the CBC. A man was reading a chapter from a novel. Mary Beth cut a piece of apple pie for both of them while Germaine poured Harvey's Bristol Cream over ice. They sat under the yellow light of the kitchen lantern. The kitchen set consisted of a built-in bench that wrapped around in a U shape and a heavy dark pine table. They sat on the same side next to one another so that Mary Beth could show Germaine more pictures. From time to time they would take a pause from conversation to listen to the radio show. It seemed to be a story of marriage and regret, a story that reflected their conversation, yet they only listened long enough to comment on the language, on some particularly lyrical passage, and then they would return to the pictures, drunk and tired.

Mary Beth started with childhood photos, the two of them, their families, high school. Then she shared her own family photos. Her kids

growing, herself aging, her husband aging. It struck Germaine as a life devoid of real landmarks. When did they travel? Where were the Christmas photos? Birthdays? New homes, new cars? Usually they were just sitting around. Her husband in front of the TV. Mary Beth at the kitchen sink. The children sitting on the stairs. Did they lack imagination, or was this it?

Germaine folded the chenille bedspread and draped it over the pine chair. The air had turned chilly, but she opened the window hoping to hear an owl. Her father had awakened her one night when she was a little girl, so that she could hear an owl's calls. The bed had the same squeak as the bed in her childhood cabin. Even when she closed her eyes, and was at the edge of sleep, the knowledge of being at the cabin was with her. She was back to a time and place that was always with her. The sounds, the water, her friends, her parents were there.

She woke and felt bereft of her husband, her daughter. It took her a moment to remember that she had a family in Florida: her family. She rolled in and out of her dreams, sleeping and waking intermittently, for a few minutes at a time, just long enough to register a dream thought, and put it in reality. When she finally woke for good, she sat up and remembered a dream with Mary Beth's husband. He was glued to a football game on TV. His beer-belly rolled when he turned to ask for another beer. Hank came into the scene. They were at the cabin. Her father walked in with a string of fish and said to Germaine, "You're not the little girl you once were. You're not my little girl." Germaine remembered him saying that to her when she was

young. It had haunted her, but she couldn't remember what it meant. Then her father said, "Look at Mary Beth's husband; is that what you want? Go back where you belong." Germaine laughed at the idea of her father saying such a thing.

Grace and Helen didn't make it up to the cabin until six PM. It was a Friday, and they said the highways were busy. By the time they arrived, Mary Beth and Germaine had everything pretty much in order, and had even taken off the storm windows. Mary Beth threw her arms around Helen and Grace as though they had been separated for months. Grace and Germaine smiled at each other. Germaine carried Grace's bag into the bedroom they would share and Grace came in and closed the door. "I want to say I'm sorry."

"For what?" Germaine asked. She figured that Grace and Helen had been talking about the situation on the way up, and that Helen had prompted Grace to try and make up. Germaine hated these contrived situations.

"I didn't mean to worry you, or to keep secrets."

"You're entitled to your own life, Mother."

"Don't be silly," Grace said with an impatient click of her tongue. "We all lead our own lives. But you're my daughter, and I didn't treat you like one."

"OK" Germaine turned to Grace and felt torn between wanting to add, I'll be civil, Mother, and wanting to hug her mother. "I'll accept your apology; we'll drop this," Germaine brushed past her mother to open the window. Her skirt twirled about her ankles. She had changed from cut-offs to a semi-sheer, ankle length skirt and a loose jersey sweater. During the

afternoon, when they came across a pair of candle holders, Mary Beth suggested that they make dinner elegant.

Grace wore her travel outfit, twill pants and a crisply pressed long sleeved shirt. She had always told Germaine with an edge of wisdom in her voice, that a long sleeved shirt was perfect to travel in during the summer. "When the temperature goes up, so can your sleeves," she would say with pride.

The fishy air from the lake was dominated by the evergreen scent. Germaine leaned against the wall and looked out across the lake.

"Your husband called," Grace said as she hung her nightgown in the closet.

"Is everything OK?" Germaine asked.

"Well, Natalie is having problems. Nothing life threatening, but she needs you. A girl needs her mother."

Germaine sat on the bed. The springs sighed. "I'll be home on Monday."

"Will you be prepared to step back into your role?"

"What role?"

"You need to pick up where you left off, as a mother and a wife. You can't remain so self-absorbed."

"Oh, now there's advice from my mother. Like you were never self-absorbed."

"I'm sure I was, but it doesn't help you to throw this problem back to me."

"Really?" Germaine got up and whirled past her mother to the door.

She turned, her skirt twirled after her movement stopped. "Maybe we should throw this back to you. Maybe we could work out some real problems. Maybe I could understand some of the behavior that I learned from you." Hearing Helen and Mary Beth from the kitchen, Germaine dropped her voice.

"Maybe my daughter didn't even call, but instead this is just a message of reproach from my mother."

Grace looked up from her suitcase. Her eyes were hard and unblinking. "Let's drop this. Nastiness simply won't work."

They dined on the deck and lingered over wine and cheesecake. A mosquito buzzed by occasionally, but no one complained of getting bit. They all leaned into their chairs, and their voices doubled with the crystal ringing of their glasses. A heady lightness floated among their chatter, and even Germaine felt relaxed in her mother's presence.

Helen got up first, to clear the plates, and then Grace jumped up and began to help.

"Sit. Sit," Mary Beth said, rising. "You two waited on us your whole lives, now it's our turn."

"No, no, no," Grace shook her head at Mary Beth. "If I sit too long I get stiff. I've been in the car all day. We'll get it. We'll save the dishes for you. If you want."

"Deal," Mary Beth said without consulting Germaine. Germaine hated listening to the conversation between Mary Beth and Grace. It seemed so contrived and sugar-coated.

Germaine stacked her own plates and headed for the kitchen. The

other three women were at the sink scraping and piling the plates. Germaine returned to the deck to wash off the table. She sat quietly, listening to the happy twitter of the other's voices. She couldn't bring herself to participate in their dish washing party. She sat and watched the sun lower until the mosquitoes began to bite, and she headed to the living room. She fluffed up a corner pillow on the couch and sunk into the overstuffed divan. She knew it was her duty to relieve her mother and Helen, but their voices were trailing off and she figured they must nearly be finished.

Grace and Helen came into the living room. Helen went to the bar and searched for a night cap. Grace settled against the opposite pillow on the couch. Mary Beth came in announcing, "I found it. Here it is. The Trivial Pursuit game." She sat on the floor and spread the game board out on the coffee table. "What color do you want?" she asked Grace.

Germaine had never liked the game. It was stupid ten years ago, and it was worse now.

"And you?" Mary Beth asked Germaine.

Helen set a couple of bottles of liquor on the table and hurried back to the bar for glasses. She set a glass in front of everyone. Setting one down for herself she took a seat on the floor.

"Let me sit there," Germaine said.

"That's sweet of you."

Germaine sat on the floor with her knees together and sideways. She rested her weight on her left hand, until her wrist got sore. She was uncomfortable and irritated by the whole scene.

"Mother and daughter against mother and daughter?" Helen asked.

"Sounds good. I guess we only need two playing pieces then," Grace said. She looked at Germaine and nodded to her. "We'll use yours."

"Fine, whatever. But I don't want to make decisions. Just move where you want."

"This sounds like it's going to be a fun game," Grace said as though she could chide Germaine into submission, obedience.

"Just play," Germaine said.

Grace and Germaine took an early lead, and both of them seemed tight jawed and competitive compared to Helen and Mary Beth, who bantered back and forth, teasing each other for their wrong answers.

Germaine switched her weight from arm to arm and only hoped the game would end. Even though they had all the wedgies and should have been wrapping up the night, they just couldn't seem to roll the right number to get in the center. After rolling eight times, Germaine stood up. "I've had it. I'm going to bed."

Everyone groaned.

"I'm sorry, I've got a headache."

"Don't be silly. Sit down," Grace commanded.

"Mother, I'm tired. This is just a game."

"It's OK," Helen said.

"No it's not," Grace said.

"Mother!"

"You can't always have your way. You won't be able to get along with anyone if you keep insisting on your own way."

"It's only a game, Grace," Helen said.

"This is a game," Grace said. "You're right. This is a game, but Germaine is always selfish. Game or not. Always."

Germaine glared at her mother. Then Germaine turned to the game board and lifted the edge of it until the pieces slid to the floor. "I'm not playing. I have a headache. I'm sorry if I've ruined everyone's fun. But I'm sick of my selfish mother calling me selfish." She stomped out to the deck. She slammed the door behind her. She sat on the chair watching the sky, believing that if she saw a shooting star she would wish that her mother could for once, just for once, see how she treated her, her own daughter.

Grace came out to the deck and sat down. Germaine knew the limits of this meeting. Either they would both get into back and forth accusations, or someone would say, "I'm sorry" and the other one would refuse to forgive.

"I'm going to bed," Germaine rose.

"Wait. Sit," Grace ordered.

Germaine sat.

"Do you think that we're too much alike? Is that it?" Grace asked.

Germaine considered this idea. "I know we accuse each other of the same things."

"Indeed. We do. And it gets us nowhere."

"Yes, nowhere."

"I don't want to fight with you. You're my daughter. We need each other."

"Really?"

"I'd say so. Look, you had a problem at home and you came to me. Doesn't that say something?"

"It does. But I realize it was a mistake."

"Really, and why is that?"

"You have no consideration for me, for the memory of my father, for my problems."

"Here we go. What about your consideration for me?"

"Jesus, this is never ending. Back to you. Back to me." Germaine twisted away from Grace and looked up to the sky with a disgusted sigh. "OK, I should be more supportive," she said quietly, as if under her breath. "I probably shouldn't have just dumped my bad relationship on you particularly when you're getting over losing Daddy. But Jesus Mother, you've ignored the fact that I even have a problem. You've tried to tell me that my father was a cheat," her voice rose excitedly. "God, even if that's true, which I doubt, why should I know it? What the hell does it have to do with me?"

"Nothing, except you always, always make it sound as though he were perfect. And he wasn't. How would you feel if Natalie made Eric the good guy and you the bad guy?"

"She does."

"OK, how do you feel about that?"

"I can put it into perspective, Mother. Daughters go through that phase."

"Well, it's a phase you never got out of."

"That's not fair. I honor both of you. Both of your behavior was impeccable."

"I don't think we can carry things that far. We're human. We all have

secrets. You could adopt that philosophy. You air your dirty laundry too freely. You shouldn't have stepped out on your family like you did. What do you think Natalie is thinking. Things happen between husband and wife and you keep it behind closed doors, for the sake of your child and your own self-respect."

"Maybe I behaved rashly, but we all do."

"Do we?"

"Sure, maybe you should tell me about this guy Rudy."

"We're talking in different terms here. I don't have a child at home to protect anymore."

"So that's the key to behavior? When you have a child at home you hide things and appear reasonable, but when the child leaves anything goes. I'll stay with Eric, and allow him to cheat with impunity and then in seven years, I split. Right?"

"You let seven years go by and you'll see this will seem like a distant problem. A problem you can handle."

"If that's the case then why would this mystery about Daddy come up now? Shouldn't it be in the past? Over with? And why, for God's sake, why did you call that guy your husband?"

"Because he is."

"He is?" Germaine turned her face up to her mother who was standing over her. The sky was dark, and Grace appeared before her daughter as a dark shadow, backlit by the house lights. Germaine couldn't picture her, didn't want to picture her.

"We were married in April."

"How could you do this? Married? I don't believe it. It doesn't even make sense." Germaine rose from her seat and moved around the light, until she could make out the features of her mother's face. She thought she could read a smirk in her expression or at least a smugness. "How could you do this to me?"

"Germaine, I wasn't doing anything to you. I was lonely and in love."

"Oh, OK, well I can believe that you were lonely, but in love? That's bull shit. Why did you have to sneak around. You knew this was wrong, that this would destroy me, and you didn't care."

Grace took her daughter by the wrist, a restraining move she used on Germaine when she was a child. "I didn't deliver this news right. I wish I could take this back. But you know the truth, and I'll leave you to digest it." Grace left the deck. She called out to the others that she was going to bed.

Mary Beth opened the door to the deck and asked, "Are you ready for bed? We're all retiring."

"I'll be in in just a minute." Germaine sat in the cool air. As soon as all the interior lights were out, she began to cry.

Chapter Thirteen

Grace

Grace woke with the image of Hank's headstone lingering from a dream, or was it from a thought? That damned headstone had caused her so many problems, but she hadn't thought about it for months. Surely Clarence's funeral had triggered her memories.

They had to wait until the spring thaw to put the headstone in place. At times, throughout the winter, Grace had been overcome with the need to visit Hank's grave. The idea of being closer to Hank or of accepting his death hadn't motivated her, but rather a sense of duty, of paying respect, had propelled her in a cold automatic way, as if they weren't even related, let alone married.

She and Hank had paid good money for the plot. She should make sure she was getting what she paid for. She should make sure the cemetery crew was maintaining the grave, the grounds. Hank would have wanted her to check. But she found that her visits were frustrating. When it snowed she couldn't find the plot. And then, she would meet other mourners, and often they would want to talk about their loved one.

Grace became increasingly uncomfortable knowing the history of more and more of these departed people. Their stories encroached on her own grieving, on her life.

At times she felt it important to grieve in just the right way; there had to be a right way. She felt that people were watching her, that they had certain expectations. One cold afternoon in February, she had made up her mind to stand over Hank's grave and think of his body as it must be in the casket; to

think of his soul as being somewhere else. But instead, when she got to the cemetery, she couldn't hold herself to Hank's grave. She drifted from headstone to headstone, reading the inscriptions, and thinking about how young the people were when they died, or wondering how they had died, or imagining the friends and families they had left behind. She lingered over many graves, until the sun was low in the sky, and it was so bitterly cold that her hands and feet were numb.

At home her thoughts became littered with dead people. She remembered many of their names, and she believed that their faces came to her. She saw them in dreams. She saw them while daydreaming over the kitchen sink, or driving down East River Road. She wondered if this were a sign that Hank had joined these people. She wondered if it were a sign that she would be joining them. It weighed on her more and more until these images took over her thoughts of Hank. She wanted her memories of him back. She fought to get this parade of the dead out of her mind. She avoided the cemetery. It was shortly after this time that she let Helen talk her into going to the dance at the Seniors' Center. She hadn't even concluded her feelings toward visiting her husband's grave when she met Rudy. It was all too soon.

Now, waking up and feeling that she might revert to that period, that time when she wasn't right, disturbed her. She was enveloped in this sadness when she pulled herself from bed and forced herself to resume her daily ritual. She was not going back. She would not let herself.

She headed for the bathroom. She passed Hank's room. God, how could she have let him sleep alone? How could she let herself sleep alone?

Why hadn't she ever realized the privilege of sleeping with him?

Primping before the mirror, seeing herself, gave her relief. She stood with the brush in hand. She put the brush on the vanity and leaned close to the mirror. She tried to look behind her eyes. She looked deep. She stared hard. She smiled at herself, yet felt she didn't really smile back. She shrugged and felt gripped by overwhelming confusion. Was that it? Confusion? There was something she understood in her face. She backed away from the mirror, and gathered the familiarity of it. It was with that same familiarity, that same--what was it--anticipation that she expected Hank to return. It was the same expectation of knowing that she'd see her face when she looked in the mirror--that expectation of Hank lingered. He was as much a part of her, as she was a part of herself--how could he fade? It seemed like yesterday he was there. Still it seemed like he'd never been there. She had been with another man. She had married another man. . .

Germaine called to Grace from outside the bathroom door. "Mom, Mom. Are you getting ready?"

For a moment, Grace started at Germaine's voice. It wasn't surprise, but more the fear that she had forgotten she needed to get Germaine to the airport. More the fear that she had forgotten that Germaine was still there. How could she face her now? How would she pull herself from this despair?

The airport was on the other side of Minneapolis. It was all highway driving, but it also was rush hour.

"Do you want me to drive?" Germaine asked as they headed into the garage.

"Certainly not." For a moment Grace considered that she had offended Germaine, but she added a slight laugh and tried to show warmth with a nod toward Germaine.

Driving east, the sun shone in sharp patches from behind the trees. Grace ducked behind the visor with each blast of sun. "It's the worst time to travel."

"Mom, we went over this. You chose this time."

"It's just a statement, not a judgment."

"Are you sure?" Germaine looked at her mother, as if imploring.

"Germaine, you're going home. I think it's time we let up."

"I'm glad you said we."

"I haven't blamed you for our troubles, have I?"

"It's implicit. It's in your movements, and your . . . reserve toward me. You're guarded."

Grace shook her head. "Germaine, Germaine, this is not helping. Where do you get these terms? You're guarded. I'm guarded. Back and forth. Back and forth . . . You know maybe we don't know how to act without your father here. Have you thought about that?"

"Well he certainly wasn't always around when he was alive. How do you account for that?"

"Well he wasn't always around, but he wasn't dead. It's different. Germaine, I miss him." Grace put her hand in her purse and rifled around for a Kleenex. She dabbed it below her eyes.

Germaine looked out the window, and then reached across to her mother and patted her knee. "I know," Germaine responded and choked.

Grace left Germaine off at the curb. She waited until her daughter was well inside the terminal. From a distance, her back, her hair, her walk, were returned to girlishness, and Grace resisted leaving the car in park and running in to tell her child that she loved her.

At twelve, when Germaine was in her first dance recital, Grace had rushed backstage to hold Germaine's slender body to her. At that moment, she had held too long, too tight. Hank had said, "Let her breathe." She let go and could tell by Germaine's look that she understood. She understood how much her mother loved her. She understood how much her mother needed her. When Germaine stepped away, Hank put his arm around Grace's shoulder. He pressed against her slightly. She wanted the weight of his body next to her now. She needed a man in her life.

When Grace pulled in the Sears parking lot she spotted Rudy right away. He was leaning against his car with his arms folded. His wiry gray hair held stiff against the breeze. The day would have been hot, but the breeze was pleasant and large puffs of cumulus clouds moved swiftly across the sky.

Rudy had called Grace the night before to arrange this meeting place. "It's not romantic, but convenient, just off the highway on the way home from the airport," he had said in a muffled voice.

Rudy walked around to open Grace's car door. "You look beautiful. I'd like to give you a kiss but I don't think this is the right place." He led her to the passenger's door of his car. He opened the door and patted the seat, as though signaling to a puppy to jump in. Rudy had a new Chrysler. And he

still seemed confused by the door locks and automatic windows. As he backed out he rolled both back windows up and down, and then he rolled Grace's window up and down before he found the switch for his own. "You look beautiful," he smiled at her and then slammed on the brakes as they approached the stop sign. "Sorry."

"You've told me twice that I look beautiful."

"It's not enough."

"Rudy, this is silly."

"It's love. I love you Grace and that's all there is to it."

It was silly, but Grace was taken by the simplicity of having a man, who only knew her as an old woman, love her. Perhaps Hank had only loved her as the girl he married. Maybe that's what had happened. But this man loved her now. She liked hearing his endearments. "I guess loving each other is all there is to it in the basic sense, but you must know by now that there are complications."

"Complications! This isn't a disease. You're alone. I'm alone. And we're attracted to each other. And compatible, I might add."

Rudy drove straight to the Seniors' Center. It was Rudy's link to everything. Grace and Hank had never considered joining a seniors' group. Grace felt that there was something contrived about the whole organization. Everyone seemed too nice, too watered down. God, that was it. That was what the years did. It watered people down.

Usually, Rudy seemed to wear Grace when he walked in. His grip at her elbow seemed too firm; he led her too quickly around to everyone, as if

showing off the new puppy. But today he guided her gently past the smiling folks haloed in their white hair. They would nod as if they had been poised on the look out for the two of them. Didn't they have anywhere else go? Had they lost their homes? Rudy smiled and winked at people. He stopped to tell a joke to Larry. He was convivial, a changed man with Germaine out of the picture.

Helen came from the corner of the room and pulled Grace aside. "I am so glad to see the two of you back together." Helen was one of the few women in the group who colored her hair, who wore bright orange, who wore leggings, American Indian jewelry.

Grace concentrated on the difference between Helen and the others. Perhaps that was why Helen loved this group. Had she defined herself by achieving the opposite of them?

Grace told Helen, "Why shouldn't we be together? The beans are out. You know we're married."

"Frankly, I wasn't sure. But I couldn't be happier." She patted Grace's cheek and then kissed it. "Did Germaine come around?"

"Oh, you know, she's got her own life. Really anything that bothers her about me is, I swear, rooted in her own private problems. Or they're rooted in having our roles reversed."

"Change is hard for her, but she'll work it out. She's a good daughter."

"Really? I wonder what a good daughter is."

Rudy walked up. "Can I interrupt?"

"Sure, my food's getting cold anyway," Helen said. "Call me. It's good to see you two together."

A buffet table was set out, and people were taking their seats in the dining hall. Grace felt that the hall had a nursing home feel to it--too many old people in one room. Larry stood when he caught sight of Rudy and raised his hand indicating there was space at his table, but Rudy pointed toward the garden. Rudy passed through the line with a tray and two plates. "This looks good. Do you feel like chicken salad? How about some soup? A roll?" he asked with the patience of a parent caring for a child.

He pointed toward the garden, "Let's sit in the sun."

They walked to the table behind the fountain. No one else was outside. The others came more for friendship than for food or flowers.

For the most part the garden had a Japanese flavor--miniaturized, low plants, bamboo stands, a pool with goldfish. But in the corner with the fountain, the garden was clearly western. At this time of year it was surrounded by irises, looking like a Monet painting. The water trickled, and a hummingbird flitted between the two feeders positioned among the flowers. Rudy carefully set out the plates and utensils and put the tray on another table. "There we go," he said proudly and pulled out Grace's chair. He pulled his chair near hers and raised his glass in a toast. "We're back together. Let's do it this time. Move in with me."

"Well that would be a switch. I've never even seen your place."

Rudy drank and watched Grace. His eyes were young. Anyone could see his happiness. "Did everything go all right between you and Germaine?"

"I'd say we parted friends."

"Is she staying in Florida?"

"She'll work things out. We all will. I know at a certain age we're

supposed to see ourselves in our parents, or our parents in ourselves, but I can't remember seeing myself in my mother. Funny, as painful as it might seem, I see myself in my daughter instead. Not the good traits mind you."

"What else is there?"

"I'm serious, Rudy. I've been thinking about this and some of the things I criticized Germaine for most, I could trace back to me. Similar things we do. I guess things she learned from me."

"Really? Like what?" The look on Rudy's face indicated interest. Grace caught herself from mentioning things that she had yet to work out with herself.

"I know I should have been more open with Hank. Now I think that some of the problems we had stemmed from my . . . oh what's the right word? From me second guessing him. From me keeping secrets."

"Hmmm . . . I'm wondering if you're blaming yourself for things that were minor. I don't think that you and Hank had any real problems. It's normal after you lose your spouse to blame yourself for every moment of unhappiness. Heck, it's part of the grieving process. Everyone here talks about that."

"It's more than that. I guess I could see it in Germaine. She's not very forgiving of Eric."

"According to her, Eric is cheating on her. Who's forgiving of that?"

"You're right. I know. But it happens. It happens in the best of marriages."

"Possibly, but do people really forgive?"

They drove out along the river. There were few stop signs but there was traffic and Rudy talked on and on taking his eyes off the road and watching Grace too frequently. Finally he pulled down by river's edge and stopped the car. "How about a little walk?"

There wasn't much of a path along the river; they stopped near a weeping willow. Rudy pulled the stringy branches apart, as if opening a curtain. "Would you like to enter? We could sit. The ground looks soft enough."

He brushed an area clear of stones and sticks and spread out his lightweight L.L. Bean parka. Both of them eased themselves down in a manner that bespoke their age. Grace sat uncomfortably with her legs out, and ankles crossed. Rudy sat on his side and leaned close to her. The river ran fast from a year of heavy rain and snow. It was warm and sunny and chickadees pecked around the ground cover.

"I know it's hard for you to talk about your life with Hank. I appreciate you mentioning your problems. I know how much you loved him, and I know how that love can turn to guilt. We've both been through it. Haven't we?"

"Yeah, and so many others. And these are our golden years? One by one we all die off."

"Well, yeah. But we all know it's going to happen. You age and your friends die."

"We know it, but it still sneaks up on you."

"Ain't that the truth? It sure did for me. I waited so long to get married. In fact, I never thought I would. We'd only been married nine

years when we learned Betty had cancer. I wanted to make a pact with her so that we could go together. I can't say that I'm not afraid to die, but I was more afraid of having her go. I waited so long. But she wouldn't have it. She was strong and stoic until the end. God knows I wasn't. After she died, I was close, real close to joining her. She was and will always be that important to me. And I know that I can't replace her, but you're different. Cliche or not it's the truth. Not a replacement, I don't want to do away with my years with her, or her memories. Yet when I'm with you, I love you as much. Can you understand that?"

"It's hard because I feel as if I'm betraying Hank. God just a year ago I was with him. But I won't deny I love being with you. I have begun to think about being with you."

"It's about time."

"I'm serious. When we were up at the lake I wished you were there. I wished you were in my bed, a bed I shared with Hank." She turned to Rudy. At that moment, he was irresistible.

"This is life. This is being alive." He moved close to her and laid her back onto the jacket. He brushed her with his fingers and looked down at her. "Will you marry me?"

She laughed. "We're married."

"Live together. Be married everyday? Will you?"

"I'll try. I'll try."

"My house?"

"Well, it sure can't work out worse than mine."

Rudy let her off at her car around 4:00. She wanted to be alone for the evening. They agreed to try his house, but she wanted to pack some things and go to his house the next day. When she turned onto her street, she was weighed down by all the years of memories before her. For a moment it appeared as it had thirty years ago. She could see Hank at home with Germaine. She recalled the first time Germaine had made cookies on her own. Grace had gone to the beauty parlor. It was a Saturday, and Hank was working in the yard. When Grace drove up in the drive, Hank waved to her from the yard. He rested against his rake, and his smile was warm and joyous. The house smelled delicious. Germaine sat at the table with a pyramid of peanut butter cookies piled before her on Grace's best china serving platter. Germaine looked young for her age, always so slight. She seemed diminished by the stack of cookies, by her proud smile. It was such a happy time. What had made Grace think of that particular day?

Now, all the same houses stood on their street. Many had new additions, trim, facades. Many of the elms had been taken down after an infestation of Dutch Elm disease. But still it was undeniably the same street. Most of the houses had at least one remaining member of the original families. And now, Grace was leaving. She was saddened, yet hopeful.

Theran was out in her yard. She waved to Grace and Grace stopped. Theran walked down the drive to the car. "Come in for coffee." She cocked her head toward the house. "I just put the pot on."

Grace hesitated.

"I could use the company. The weekends are the hardest for me. At least during the week I have my soap operas."

Grace pulled into the drive. Theran's house had the same lay-out as Grace's. It struck Grace that this fact should have brought them closer throughout the years. The kitchen had the same busy-print wall paper that it had twenty, maybe thirty years ago. Farm and pasture scenery, with a wainscot border of chickens, or was it roosters? The table was covered with a matching table cloth. Certainly, it hadn't lasted all these years. Where, in heaven's name, had she found a replacement?

"You look so nice. Were you out on the town?" Theran asked.

"I brought Germaine to the airport."

"She got a late start." Theran set out mugs decorated with chickens.

"She left early, but I ran some errands."

Theran leaned over Grace and poured. "Oh, yes, errands, errands . . . you just don't realize how many things your husband did for you until he's gone. I never realized how many errands there are." She pressed her lips matter-of-factly and gave a firm nod.

"I had a lunch date," Grace said in a confessional tone. Realizing at the heart of it, she wanted to brag.

"How nice," Theran sat next to her. "Oh," she jumped up. "Here I have this coffee cake, just made it this morning. I don't know who I'm baking for, but can't seem to stop." She came back to the table with a brown sugar covered cake. She took down two plates from the hutch.

"I don't think I have room."

"Here, just a taste." Theran cut a wedge and put it before Grace.

"Thanks, you always were the neighborhood baking champ. Clarence never missed an opportunity to brag about your baking."

"God rest his soul." Theran bowed her head.

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm keeping busy. Of course the nights are hard. But . . . well I know this sounds funny . . . I feel closer to Clarence at night. Sometimes I feel like he's here. He's even been turning on the lights for me when I walk into the living room."

Grace looked at Theran and realized no matter how crazy it sounded, Theran believed it. What was the harm? "Do you see him?"

"I feel him . . . Well, anyway, I can't explain it, but he hasn't left completely."

Grace reached across the table and squeezed Theran's hand. "I understand. I'm often overcome by strong memories. Sometimes I wake confused. Not knowing where Hank is."

"Yes, I understand. Anyway this may be a bad time, but I have something I've been trying to say to you. I've been trying to get up the courage to talk to you about this. I have this letter that Hank wrote to you and gave to Clarence years ago. I feel sort of uncomfortable about this. On one hand, I wish I had a letter coming to me from Clarence, but Hank's may be painful. I haven't read it, or anything. Well, no one has. It's sealed. But Clarence gave it to me the night before he died. He told me to tell you that Hank knew that you knew about his illegitimate daughter. I hope that the fact that Clarence knew this and that I now know this isn't too hurtful to you. I'd never tell anyone else."

"I guess, in a sense, it feels kind of good knowing that someone else knows this secret. Frankly it's been too much for me to bear all of these years.

Too much. That's the one thing. The one thing, I'd like to go back and clear up between Hank and myself. More than anything, I'd like to talk to him about this. I can't believe we went all these years, not confronting it. I blame him for not telling me, yet if I could go back, I'd swallow my pride and tell him that I knew. But the longer I kept the secret the harder it was to reveal."

At 6:30, when Grace finally got in, her house felt cooler than the warm evening air outside. She sat at her kitchen table with the letter in front of her. It was still in its envelope. It was yellowed. It read "to Grace" in Hank's best cursive writing. The house was still. The refrigerator hummed quietly, but it was the calm of the day. And the handwriting reached out from the past, from the grave and held Grace in the stillness of liquid time. Just the idea of breaking the seal that had been created by Hank's living saliva paralyzed Grace. She felt this was her mission, her last task to complete, before she moved on to her new life. Her body convulsed with fear and sadness as she broke the seal and pulled out the letter:

April 24, 1984

Darling Grace,

About ten years ago when I was cleaning the garage I found a box containing some of your things. I don't want you to think I was prying, I didn't know that they were personal until I came across the letters and pictures that were meant for me. I'm sorry that you felt the need to hide these from me. I'm sorry that I've hidden so much from you. I couldn't, and I still can't bring myself to face you about this. There wasn't a moment of my

life, from the day I met you, that I didn't love you more than anything else in the world.

This isn't an excuse this is just the way things were. During the war, I thought I was going to die. I was only fired on once, but I could not overcome the fear of that. I was in constant fear. Margaret was in the British Army. We worked together. When I was with her, I could forget my fear.

When I didn't write her back, she called me at work. She had written to Gus, who had met her in England, and he told her where I worked. We agreed on money to support Geneva. I sent it regularly until she reached twenty-one. Jean sent pictures of Geneva, throughout the years, and Geneva wrote to me twice--when she got married and when she had a baby. I felt responsible for so much pain, yet I just couldn't think of her as a real daughter--not like Germaine. She was a little British girl who needed my help.

Anyway, both she and her son died in a car accident, last week. I feel as if now I should be able to put some of this behind me. I've tried to, well I've wanted so much to talk to you about this, but I don't have the courage. My fear of this is as strong as the fear I had during the war.

I love you, and will always be sorry for this.

Love Always,

Hank

Grace woke with the baby dream still at the edge of her thoughts. It was the same dream. The baby behind shattered glass. The baby was always Germaine, but this time it was Geneva. No, that was wrong, too. It was

Germaine with Geneva's eyes, or was that it? No, it was the hand reaching into the bassinet to pick it up, at first it was her hand and then as she looked down to it, it transformed to Hank's hand.

And then, as she stumbled to the bathroom under the spell of the dream, she noticed the bare spot where the picture had been. Despite the fact that the picture had hung in a grouping of family pictures, despite the fact the Grace hadn't looked at it for some time, hadn't even stopped to gaze at it after Hank's death, she knew immediately that it was her wedding picture. God, that Germaine. When did she get so brazen? When did she move from self-centered to down right selfish? How could Germaine not consider for one moment that it was her mother who was the real victim here? She would call her. She'd let her know that she had overstepped her bounds.

Driving over to Rudy's, Grace tried to concentrate on his directions which she wrote down verbatim and were now cradled in her lap. Yet, in spite of her deep concentration, she couldn't escape trying to analyze the dream. She couldn't lessen her anger at Germaine. She kept picturing the bare wall. Suddenly that bare spot was the shadow of Geneva that cast itself over all of their lives. Or was the shadow Germaine? God, what was she thinking? It wasn't Germaine, it was the idea of Hank fathering another daughter so close to their happiness over Germaine's birth that affected the relationship between Hank and Grace, between Hank and Germaine and between Grace and Germaine. Was that why Grace's deliberate and careful mothering never quite seemed to work? Was it paled behind Geneva's shadow?

Grace didn't want to spoil her evening with Rudy--this beginning, yet she hoped she could talk to him about this. As she was considering how to tell all to Rudy she passed her turn off. She U-turned back and considered heading for home. But she really wanted to be with Rudy, despite panic.

He had said that he lived near the river, but as Grace circled back and around to the turn off she realized that his street was on the river. She wondered why she had never asked him more about his house. Why hadn't she driven by out of curiosity? What had she thought of him? Was he a shadow of her husband the way that Geneva was a shadow of Germaine?

Nearing the house she checked her hair in the mirror. She smiled and ran her forefinger across her teeth. She perked up the collar on her shirt and smoothed her hands down across her pants. As the street wound around closer to the river the houses got larger and more stately. Grace suddenly felt underdressed, out of her league. Rudy's house was at the end of the street. It was down a long drive. Only peeks of it could be seen from the road. Grace became nervous and thought again of turning back, and then she saw Rudy walking toward her car, coming down the drive with his arms waving overhead. She could see his smile, his joy. Behind him she could see the house through the trees. It was huge.

"Here, I've got the garage door opener, just put her in." She pulled in next to Rudy's car and got out. He took her hand and led her out of the garage. "Welcome home," he said, and nodded and motioned toward the house. "Do you have luggage?" he asked.

"Just two bags."

"Does that mean you're not staying long?"

"Not at all. I just thought we could do this in stages."

"We'll hire movers." He pulled her close and kissed her lightly.

"Let me help you in." He led her to the front door, and then he struggled to lift her across the threshold.

"My God, you'll kill yourself," Grace screamed.

"Well, I won't have that much in me for too many more years, that's for sure."

The house was all in white. White walls, tile, carpeting, sofas, lamp shades. Grace had never actually been in such a showplace other than Germaine's. "I can't believe this, you never mentioned your house at all and look at it."

"My wife got the idea from the model home. We thought it was more than we could afford at the time, but we managed and it paid off. I couldn't touch river front property now. Here, let me show you the kitchen, I had it remodeled after . . . she died. I was looking over some magazines, and was struck by this one kitchen and decided to change everything."

The kitchen was in the back of the house and led right into a three season sunroom which faced the river. It was modern and sleek, but still warm. He had tiled everything himself in a desert sand color. The cabinets were light-colored oak, with glass inserts in the doors. The countertops were bare. Clearly he had everything built in and placed neatly out of sight.

"It's spectacular."

"Can you live with it?"

"The idea seems strange."

"Let's not think about the future yet. We have now." He extended his

hand toward the porch. "Let's get comfortable before the sun sets."

Grace sat down on a wicker settee. The room was done up in flowery spring prints, plants, and wicker.

Rudy went to the bar. "What'll it be?"

"How about a beer?"

"Sounds good. I'll have one too."

He sat down close. Their knees touched. "I know this is awkward and if you feel out-of-place, we'll get our own place."

"This is beautiful. We'll work something out." A cardinal came to the feeder. And a light breeze drifted through the yard, through the screens.

"You know, I don't want to lose the memories of my wife, but I had to change the kitchen. Once I changed it, I felt better. So if we changed things for you I'd feel better still." He ran his fingers down the side of his frosted mug. He looked kindly at Grace. "Have you talked to Germaine?"

"I haven't heard from her, but I need to call. You won't believe what she did."

"Really? What?" He stood and went for another beer.

"She stole my wedding picture right off the wall."

"Surely it's not stealing."

"She should have asked. How did she think I'd feel looking at a bare spot on the wall."

"She's troubled. Be patient."

"You're right. I should be patient. I don't feel I was sensitive to her problems when she was here, but there are things I need to tell her in order to get on with my life, and it's time. Whether it's a good time for her or not."

"It can't wait?"

"No I can't hold off, I've waited too long. I'll call her in the morning. I guess I'll begin by telling you. This will be my practice run."

Rudy sat down in the chair across from Grace. He leaned back and sipped his beer. His eyes were gentle and open, and Grace knew she could talk to him more easily than to Hank. But of course he had nothing to lose in this conversation. Hank couldn't put his guilt behind him. It was sad to think of carrying it to his grave, but he had chosen that. Perhaps it was too far after the fact to benefit from telling Germaine, but it wasn't just tattling on Hank's behavior; after all, Germaine had had a half sister, and knowing that fact could help her. It couldn't make things worse.

"You know Hank was a good man," Grace began. She twisted her hand around her glass. "Maybe he was too good. Maybe he expected to be too good, and then when he wasn't he couldn't accept it. Anyway--"

The summer sun set late, and night was upon them. They had forgotten supper. Instead of eating, Rudy sat near his wife and listened. And Grace felt light and easy for the first time in many, many years.

Chapter Fourteen

Germaine

At some point between Minneapolis and Jacksonville, Germaine's thoughts turned back to her mother and Rudy. It certainly was understandable that the image of the two of them could only leave her feeling betrayed and deserted. Often, as a child, when she traveled with her parents, she felt a similar feeling of separation from her mother. She would sit in the backseat of the car watching her parents talk. Often it seemed as though she weren't there. They would talk their own language; they would talk about her.

God, when her father died, she had planned on traveling with her mother alone. Now her mother was more than likely making plans with this man. What did they think? How could Rudy fit into Germaine's family? He had no history with them. If only she had been prepared. If only she had been given more time to get used to her father's death. Lots of people face this same problem, she was sure of that. And she was a woman who could handle problems, not that she had had that many, but still, she had a way of shoring up, that was for sure. She would talk with Cavitch, read some books, and she'd be OK. Mature.

When finally she reached a settlement in her mind about that issue, not the direct issue of her mother and Rudy--that might never be completely settled for her--but the issue of her dealing with it in a satisfactory way, she pictured herself confronting Eric. No, confronting was the wrong word. She wasn't going to confront him, it was going to be more controlled than anything a confrontation might imply. What she needed to do was some

problem-solving, regardless of which direction their relationship would take. She would not allow intense feelings to undermine her ability to reason. Perhaps, on some level, Grace had reduced her to a child, but then she was Grace's child. However, back in her own home, she would be different. She would be the adult not the child.

Germaine despised being wedged between two strangers. She had wanted to fly first-class, but her return ticket was open and when she decided on a date, first-class was full. She hated sitting elbow to elbow and asking someone to stand in order to get up and use the bathroom. This time, she was sandwiched between two men. The window guy was occupied by a video game on a laptop computer and the aisle guy looked professorial and was nodding off over a book.

Germaine was biting her nails. She hadn't bitten her nails for years. Her first thought was that her mother had reduced her to this, but no matter how she looked at it, her mother hadn't reduced her to anything. True, her mother had somehow provoked the most immature, selfish behavior she had displayed in years, but she had held her own. And she was clear that she had every right to stand her ground. After all her mother didn't have the right to judge her.

The aisle man bobbed his head and quickly looked to her. "I'm sorry. I must have dozed off."

"Must be a good book." Germaine regretted the probability that she had sounded sarcastic.

"Actually it is. But I've read it many times," the man said warmly, although perhaps a bit defensively.

"Couldn't you find something else?" Germaine smiled and hoped the man believed she was more witty than snide.

"I'm preparing for a class I teach."

Unconsciously, Germaine raised her hand to her mouth and chewed the corner off her last remaining nail. "I figured you were a teacher. A professor?"

"Yes, indeed." He turned back to his book.

Germaine pulled her hand from her mouth and placed both hands on her knees. She looked over her broad knuckles and thin boney finger. She recalled that on the way to Minneapolis she had looked over her hands with a sense of pride. Her nails had been long and sleeked over with polish. Now the little nubs of skin around the nails were red and inflammed. She ran her fingers through her hair and wondered if she should excuse herself and take a moment in the restroom to primp. Just then, the plane began its descent. She was caught off guard by that sudden pull downward, the final acquiescence to gravity--seeming like an abrupt, hasty decision.

Germaine was not afraid of flying. She never considered any possibility other than landing safely. Yet now, her palms were sweating. She had a notion that her past was catching up to her. Whatever that meant. She was gripped by anxiety. Visions of Natalie ran through her thoughts as a video montage from her birth to her pre-pubescence. The images seemed to fit expectations. The cute and chubby baby, the sweet, coy child, the lanky surly adolescent. Then Germaine was overwhelmed by a blank vision. No matter how she tried, she could not conjure up the image of the daughter who was on the ground waiting for her. Probably she would be waiting at the

gate. She might be there now. Germaine had only left her two weeks before, yet she could find no sense of her, no idea of her, no vision of her. For a moment she wondered if some other woman had been dressing her, influencing her life and her thoughts. But that was silly. It was that sort of self-destructive thinking that had led Germaine in circles before. Natalie loved her, there was no doubt about that.

As the plane made its final descent, the smell of paper mills and swamp gases from Jacksonville circled the plane and filled the cabin. Germaine watched the flow of traffic on the ground and wondered if any of the little automobiles contained her husband, her daughter. Her most precious possessions housed in a little match box car. Germaine stopped herself and wondered how she could think of her husband or of Natalie, for that matter, as a possession. Surely that was a slip in her thinking that meant nothing. She didn't, by any stretch of the imagination, want them to be her possessions.

During those impatient moments, trapped in the aisle, waiting for the door to open, the line to progress, Germaine snapped at her nails and tapped her toe. As she waited enveloped between the aisle guy and an overweight lady from the opposite seat, she pictured Eric standing at the end of the jetway. He was a glorious man. Any woman would love to be greeted by him. If nothing else, she should be happy by the sight of him.

The jetway tunnel was hot and humid and unusually dark. As they entered the light of the terminal, the people ahead of her were stopping to be gathered by their relatives. Germaine couldn't bring herself to crane her neck for a glimpse of Eric and Natalie. She would let them appear when it was her

turn to exit. But as she walked into the building, she couldn't recognize one face. Her eyes scanned the crowd, while she consciously made an effort not to look overly concerned. And then she heard Natalie. "Mom, Mom. Over here."

Germaine turned and realized that she had only been gone for a blink. Natalie stood before her as the same girl she had left behind. Sweet, undersized, still her daughter.

"Mom," her voice squealed. This was her excited tone, her happy tone. "Daddy's coming. We were in a for-real traffic jam. He didn't leave late or anything. It wasn't his fault." Natalie looked up at Germaine. Her eyes were expectant, happy. "Mommy I missed you."

"Oh, my. I missed you too." Germaine put her arms out to Natalie, and Natalie closed her arms tight around her mother. Tighter than Germaine remembered her doing. "Hey, let's find Daddy."

"Yeah, you won't believe the house. But I'm not going to spoil anything. Daddy missed you too, you know."

Germaine stopped Natalie. "Hold it. Hold it, hold it." Germaine pulled Natalie off to the side out of the flow of people heading toward the main terminal. "Here stop." She stopped Natalie and looked down at her. She hoped she wouldn't betray herself and show any hint of displeasure, or tension. She smiled and tried to soften her eyes. "Please don't give anything away, but just give me a hint about the house."

"I promised Daddy that I wouldn't say anything. He wants to surprise you."

"Do you think I'll like the surprise?"

"Sure, why shouldn't you?" Natalie's voice was sweet and hopeful. It wasn't right for Germaine to press her for information, to ask her to understand life beyond her years. But Germaine hoped that Eric hadn't done anything to the house that would make her feel uncomfortable. It was her house too. He really didn't have the right to change things without consulting her. Of course he knew that. Of course he did. She let go of Natalie's shoulders and took her by the hand. "Come on. Let's not keep your father waiting too long." They stepped into the pace of the streaming travelers. Germaine could not recall Jacksonville's airport on a busier day.

The main terminal fanned out from a circular rotunda. Local car dealerships displayed their cars in the dead space of the massive circle. This month the Lexus and the Infinity were featured. No one would deny that the cars gleamed and caught the eye, but people were in a hurry. No one was there to shop. Germaine and Natalie turned and caught sight of Eric.

From a distance there was something in Eric she didn't recognize. Germaine believed he would be carrying flowers, but instead he looked a bit disheveled, or was it helpless? Endearing? His hair was clearly in need of cutting, and, for the life of her, Germaine couldn't remember seeing Eric's hair shaggy. He smiled as she neared, and waved with a hint of abandonment, both arms flailing about over his head. Germaine could picture him adding a couple of jumps to his display of genuine joy. For a moment Germaine considered moving quickly toward him, but that might send a message she couldn't consummate.

When she reached him, without hesitation or reserve, he put his arms around her. "There hasn't been a moment when we didn't miss you." He

looked down at Natalie, "Isn't that right, sweetie?"

"Yeah, Mom, I told you Daddy missed you."

He took Germaine by the hand and they headed toward the car.

Germaine could have cried; she blinked at the sun to suppress it. It was almost seven, but the sun was bright, the air muggy. Germaine was glad to slide into the passenger seat and direct the air conditioning toward her face. They circled out of the airport and onto the highway. The sky looked orange.

"I thought, perhaps, if you want, we could go out to the beach for supper."

Whenever they celebrated a special occasion they headed to the beach.

"Are you up to it, or do you want to head home?"

"It sounds good. I'm hungry."

Eric turned to Natalie in the back. "See I told you."

Germaine felt betrayed by Eric and Natalie's complicity at her expense. But, on the other hand, she decided that they had only conspired for her benefit.

The drive to the beach was relatively trafficless, smooth. But Germaine's husband and daughter, in their pleasantness, in their hinting and winking back and forth, in their overjoyed demeanors, kept Germaine on edge. She wondered if the rest of their family life would be bubbly on the surface and simmering underneath. It suddenly struck Germaine that her therapy had been a waste. She should be, after all, enjoying this moment. Wasn't this what she wanted. Her mother happy. Her husband in love with her, and showing it? Her daughter relating to their lives together and not being self-absorbed? But you couldn't just accept this as happiness.

Whenever there was happiness it was at the expense of something more important. Truly knowing yourself. Communicating honestly. Oh, God, all that bull shit. Just be happy.

They pulled into the parking lot of the Sea Turtle. It wasn't their favorite place, but it was one of the few places that hadn't closed or changed owners. Eric said it gave him a sense of home to know it was still there. Germaine was comforted to be ushered to an oceanview seat in front of the large picture window. Germaine had often told Eric that the windows in this restaurant needed to be washed everyday. What was the point of an ocean view if it were obscured by saltwater streaks? This evening she looked past the windows and watched the waves, the dark gray moving off and off.

Eric talked kindly. He told Germaine about Natalie's and his life together while Germaine was gone. The little everyday things. Habits. Nothing out the ordinary. Germaine felt replaced, yet liberated. She had never thought of leaving the two of them alone. But now, she felt she might travel, join a group, or a friend.

"We got along," Eric ended his story. "But there wasn't a day that we didn't miss you." Eric turned his head as if he could have choked up.

"You've said that," Germaine said, wishing she hadn't. Knowing she sounded cold. "I missed you guys too." Which of course was true, to some extent, despite being wrapped up in her situation with her mother. She worried and hoped she wasn't too selfish.

The drive home was dark and moonless. Once they crossed the Butler Bridge and turned onto their country road everything was dead-dark and still.

"Turn off the lights," Natalie shouted to Eric.

"Turn off the lights?" Germaine asked.

"Yeah, Dad's been seeing how far he could drive without the lights on," Natalie said pulling on the back of Germaine's seat.

"She makes it sound dangerous, foolish. But really I've only coasted a bit. Just a silly little game in the dark. Like telling a ghost story around the campfire."

"You don't have to justify it. You're a grown man. I trust your judgment."

"Can he turn them off?" Natalie asked her mom, grabbing the back of the seat hard in the irritating way inconsiderate passengers do on flights.

"Go for it," Germaine said to Eric.

The end of the road just before their driveway was gravel and bumpy with low shoulders. Trees hung over the road, and Spanish moss draped before them illuminated by the headlights. Eric flicked out the light. It was black without reference. Although he immediately flicked them back on, for that one moment Germaine realized that it wasn't a good idea. For one moment three of them encased in their happy game was foolish. With the lights on she watched the trees, the road, the shoulders with new intensity. She looked toward Eric with new intensity. How could he change so much in two weeks? He never played little games like this before. She turned back to Natalie and wondered how she could be leaning into the back of the seat and squealing with joy. Just fifteen days ago, when Germaine drove Natalie to the gym, she sat in the passenger seat, taciturn, moody. Who were these people?

"Isn't that cool?" Natalie asked.

"The coolest," Germaine replied.

"Daddy let me drive. Oh . . . I guess I'm not supposed to say that. Daddy said he'd tell you first."

"Isn't that against the law?" Germaine turned to Eric as he turned the car up their drive.

"No, not when it's on private property. We were only driving around here."

It was too dark to see Eric's face but Germaine pictured an upper-hand look. She enjoyed some aspect of the fact that Eric and Natalie had made out OK, but this overbonding had a clear exclusionary edge to it. But had anything really changed? Well, Natalie was bubbly and communicative, but more than likely this was her normal demeanor around Eric when they are alone.

"It's OK Eric. It's your life."

As they neared the house Eric reached across Germaine's lap to retrieve the garage door opener in the glove compartment. He looked up at her. She caught his expression under the light of the glove compartment. It seemed conciliatory. "It's our life. I want you to know how important that is to me. Our life."

"OK," Germaine said.

Opening the living room door, Germaine spent a tense moment wondering about "the house." But it looked the same. What was different. Should she ask?

"Come on, Mom," Natalie pulled her forward. Away from the foyer.

"Look."

Natalie turned on the lights. There were flowers everywhere. Roses mostly, but also potted mums, azaleas, freesias, gardenias, paper-white narcissises. They were in pots with silver, pink and purple foil, mostly, but some were in vases. They sat on every table, on the piano, on the piano bench. They were lined up across the floor. Germaine looked at Eric. He beamed. He had that innocent boy look, the one that always made Germaine think of him as a different person.

"Everytime Daddy came home he had more flowers. He got them at the hospital, Publix, a flower shop, everywhere."

"My god, whatever made you do it?"

"Only hyperbole could mirror how much I missed you. I am absolutely sorry for anything I've done to hurt you. Absolutely."

"My god, you're embarrassing me."

"I'm sorry for the display. It's too much. Perhaps it seems insincere, but my defenses are down. I'm exposed. I can't live without you. Period."

"I'm touched."

After Natalie had gone to bed and the house settled in a deep sigh, the two of them sat across the table from one another as they had so often. Eric had made coffee for them and they drank it slowly from mugs.

Germaine looked up over the brim. "I've never cheated on you, why did you cheat on me? How can you think you'd make it all right with a million flowers?" She hadn't expected to talk about his cheating. Her mother insinuated that she had remained quiet all those years. Why couldn't

Germaine?

"I don't expect anything. Well, sometimes I expect the worst, but I don't expect that I can ever make amends. But I can't give up."

"Damn it, give me an explanation. Make something up."

Eric squirmed. The way he inched his body and opened his mouth twice without a sound, gave Germaine satisfaction. For a moment she imagined her mother and father under similar conditions. She saw them young, as they looked in their wedding picture. She saw them sitting across their Early American pine table. But in the scene, when it seemed like the right moment for one of them to speak, they were silent. Germaine wanted to make them speak. Eric turned his head toward the double French doors that lead off to the waterway. He put his hand over his mouth and looked off indicating sadness.

"Jesus you say you want us to be fine, but you won't even give me the courtesy of a few words on this?" She got up and made a dramatic pivot away from him. She paused and turned to get his attention. "I'd like to scream and yell but I won't with Natalie here. You're simply not going to get that from me, but let me say this with my strongest convictions, we have nothing, no chance, until you talk." She turned and walked to the bedroom.

Eric had set her big bag on the bed. She unlocked it and opened it. Her parents' wedding picture was on top. She couldn't believe that she hadn't wrapped it. But there it was looking up at her. Her father's eyes too serious. Her mother trying to pose like a movie star. Despite the years that had passed from that day, it seemed so live. She took the picture out and placed it on the dresser beneath Eric's and her wedding picture that hung on the wall. The

juxtaposition was oddly awkward. Her parents' old black and white photo looking so much more glamorous. She could only understand that this meant something, but she didn't know what. Was it that her parents' marriage had lasted? She used to feel that it had lasted in spite of her mother. In spite of her mother's moods, and controlling nature, but could she have been so wrong? What does a child know of her parents' situation? Everything. Nothing.

Eric walked up behind Germaine without her hearing him. She started. It made her instantly angry. "Damn it!" She turned to him. "Shit! Fuck! Damn it. Give me peace."

"What could I say that would give you peace?"

"Something. Just say something."

"Let's go out and sit by the pool. We can name some stars. I could gather my courage."

On the way out, Eric flicked on the heater for the spa. "We can put our feet in it if it gets cold."

"Just get some wine."

He walked back into the house without a word, being the obedient husband that her father was. In the short time he was in, Germaine contemplated telling Natalie about Eric's infidelity. Why should Natalie see her mother as the bad guy in this situation. Eric was already the perfect parent in Natalie's eyes. The discovery probably would only tarnish her image of her father. Not even a bruise, just a tarnish. It certainly would be easier to hear the fact now than forty years after it. Forty years. Jesus, here and now take a stance on this. Forgive or leave the marriage.

Eric walked through the darkness. She caught a glimpse of his white sweater. He clanged the wine glasses. "Don't want to scare you again."

"I hope not."

"Let's dangle our feet. Get comfortable."

They sat on the edge of the spa. Eric raised his pant legs, dipped his feet slowly into the warm water. He poured a glass of wine. "Here. Can you see?"

Germaine put her hand around the stem, "I've got it." She could hear him pouring a glass for himself. The sound felt good. The sip of wine and the water swirling around her ankles immediately brought a wave of conciliation. But she kept a presence of mind that warned her of artificial stimulation.

"You know, Jane had been coming on to me for a while." Eric began without one polite word.

"No I guess I didn't know." Germaine turned from the water and caught Eric's shadow.

"Well, frankly I found it unattractive," he continued as though Germaine had said nothing. "But, I guess it fed my ego. Not that my ego needs much feeding."

"God, Eric how big of you. I never thought I'd hear you say something so honest about yourself."

"Really?" he dropped his voice to a near whisper. "That sounds kind of rude."

"Sorry, but don't even try to put me on the defensive."

"Sincerely, I'm not. I'm trying to say something about something I

don't understand myself. It's hard, Germaine. It's hard. It's funny because we've been together so long . . . but . . . well of course this isn't easy . . . shouldn't be easy to tell you." His voice was low and echoed contrition. "But there are many things that are hard to say to you."

"Really?"

"No, no. That's not what I mean. I mean my thoughts. My feelings, they're hard to reveal. I don't know, but when we're together I always feel that I've got to be on my toes, or my guard, I don't know. I'm not saying that it has anything to do directly with you, but . . . well I feel that you don't really love me. I feel you're somewhere else, or that you're looking at me critically."

"Eric, this is a bunch of bull shit. You cheat on me and explain it by blaming me. No way. I won't take this." Germaine pulled her feet from the water and began to stand.

"I'm sincerely trying to make you see how I feel. I love you . . . is there anything left I can say to get us past this? I want to be yours and only yours. I won't even say that I want you to be mine because you'd take it wrong."

"What gives you the idea that I don't want to commit to you the way that you claim you want to commit to me? I mean, how have I ever shown you anything but my commitment to you?"

"I'll take the blame for this, OK?" Eric said. "But . . . maybe I'm reading into your actions. Maybe I'm extrapolating cues, but . . . I don't know, but you don't always make me feel welcome."

"I don't always make you feel welcome? What is that supposed to

mean?" Germaine stood over Eric as he sat on the edge of the hot tub.

"I don't think I can explain it when you're being so defensive. Can't you sit down and listen?"

Germaine moved to the other side of the tub and dangled her feet once again. "I'm all ears."

"You reject me in little ways. Natalie notices it too. She feels that edge of rejection. It hangs over things like a cloud."

"Great, now it's my motherhood. What else?"

"This is coming off wrong. Because, well, it's something I like about you. You're always a challenge. But since Hank died, I can't reach you."

"Blaming my father's death is not fair at all."

"No it's not. But I loved him too. I know that's beside the point. It's just that it all adds up and I was vulnerable. Jane was there. Even though I had told her no I wasn't interested, she was there. I gave in. I feel uncomfortable giving you details, but they seem important."

"So do it. Just tell me what's important."

"I don't know what you thought you saw, but there was nothing going on in the hospital. She flirted with me often. And I clearly rejected her. I rejected her strongly enough that I wondered how she could keep it up without embarrassing herself."

"I guess you're just so irresistible."

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm building a case for my commitment to you. Anyway, I was lonely. I couldn't get through to you. After a late case we stopped for a drink. I wanted to because I wanted to talk to someone. I don't know but it wasn't what you think."

"How do you know what I think?"

"I don't. I don't. Tell me what you think. I mean . . . do you love me? Can we get over this?"

"It's just so hard for me to buy. I think you're the one who's distant, and you say it's me."

"Germaine, I heard you talk about your mother and father often. You've told me over and over your mother did this, your mother did that, and then you'd turn around and do the same exact things."

"Wow, that's really hitting below the belt."

"I'm sorry. That's the way I see it. I love your mom. I think she's a great person. But it just seemed like she was holding something against Hank. I'm interested to see how it all shapes up between her and her new husband."

"How can you say that so casually? Don't you think I have feelings? God, my father is barely dead, and in your typical cavalier way you mention Rudy as her husband."

"Well he is. He's not going away."

"That's not the point."

"Germaine, I'm sorry, I agree it was too fast. It's hard for all of us to adjust to this. I'll bet it's hard for your mother. So let's forget that for now and go back to us. Germaine, I love you. I need you. And I don't want to go on without you. I like our family. I like our relationship. I just wish that we could get over this."

He slid around the edge of the pool and took her hand. "Germaine please give me a chance."

When Eric turned off the bedroom light a searchlight from a barge flashed around the room. It seemed to bounce across the room's corners. "It's good luck," Eric said as he lifted the covers.

The warmth of the air caught Germaine by surprise. She let her cool silk nightgown slip off her feet. The feel of Eric's breath down her shoulders ran straight to the center of her. As he moved his hand up her thigh for one nervous moment he stopped and the light bounced again across the room. It seemed to pause for a split second at the picture of her parents, at the picture of Eric and Germaine.

Eric pulled his weight from Germaine's body and looked down at her. His eyes didn't move until she said, "I do want you."