

This Hunger Is Secret

Julie Greene

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To the awesome patients at Alcott and to everyone
everywhere
who suffers from an eating disorder or any mental
illness:

Let us tell our stories.
Let us stand and shout our words to the world,
and never, ever shut up.

This book is dedicated to the memory of
Joseph Coleman Casey
1958-2003

Preface to the 2016 Free Version

After much deliberation, I decided that I no longer wanted to charge my readers to access my book, nor continue my relationship with Chipmunkpublishing. In the interest of freedom of speech and freedom of access to information, anyone can now download and read this book completely free of charge, or view it online.

I have not altered the original text, except to shorten the title and append the acknowledgements. I am instead providing some background information regarding some of the stories contained in the book.

I no longer use the words “mentally ill” to describe myself, nor does anyone in my current acquaintance ever describe me in that way. In 2014, I realized that besides my eating disorder, I never had any of the so-called “illnesses” that I was assigned. I realize that my use of “mental health services” was a waste of decades of my life. I deeply regret entering the System and being coerced onto Social Security Disability.

This book was constructed in braided format, that is, the chapters are split up and alternate back and forth between one and the other.

The chapter called “Pro Re Nata” describes my time spent in Metropolitan State Hospital in 1986. The chapter called “Walking the Line” describes my time spent at a residence at McLean Hospital called Hall-Mercer, during the year and a half that I was disabled by electroshock “treatments.” At the time that I wrote the

original manuscript I didn't realize that the “illness” I experienced during that time was due to the aftereffects of electroshock. My providers tried to convince me that I had suddenly developed a new “mental illness.” However, after some time, I realized that I had been deceived, that the new diagnosis was a way to cover up the electroshock damages. Re-diagnosing following damages by providers is commonly done as a way of avoiding lawsuits and absolving providers of blame, placing blame on the patient's “underlying illness” instead.

I no longer see a therapist nor a psychiatrist. I believe these practices harmed me and my family deeply. I know I am alive today because I live free of psychiatric diagnosis and “treatment” altogether. My exit from the System has literally saved my life.

Julie Greene, 2016

Disclaimer

There is some discrepancy between what I have written and what may or may not be accurate, as is the case in all memoirs. I write mostly from my memory and my journals. In several chapters I have compounded characters to simplify the plot, and I confess that I never once walked into the girls' bathroom in high school; I invented my venture into that room for the sake of storytelling. The "friendship ring" did not come off my finger until college. I truly considered myself a coward, and in many ways, I was.

I made many attempts to write about my beloved partner, Joe Casey, while constructing this manuscript. However as I progressed, I realized that my grief was so deep and raw that I needed to wait, and possibly keep these unwritten words within my heart and cherished in silence.

My emotions around the key characters in this book are accurately described. All hospital scenes, including those depicted in "A Forgotten Line," "Walking the Line," "Pro Re Nata," and most of the day treatment scenes in "At the Crossroads" are accurate, but only to my recollection. Almost all names have been changed or abbreviated. Characters have been disguised to hide their identity. As my advisor at Goddard College, Beatrix Gates puts it, writing is the best revenge.

Prologue: Connections

When I was ill, nobody listened to me, or at least nobody heard. When and if I spoke, I didn't make my point well. My tongue didn't have the right words, and I was timid. Now and then a word came out: "wind," "grow," "china doll"—but the words wouldn't line up properly. They fluttered in the air before me like downy feathers, and I couldn't catch them. I tried to speak to the doctors, and to them there were even fewer words. All that came out was rage, or tears, or silence. The doctors responded, mostly, by turning away. I saw them turn like figures on a cuckoo clock: methodically, with clicks of their shoes, timed just so. When I saw their suits and ties, I was sickened.

When I was ill, I was misunderstood, that much was true. I realize this only now that I have a grasp on things, when I can see myself as an ill person and a well person side by side. I recall that when I was ill even the most basic tasks of communication daunted me: eye contact, body language, even sentence construction. "I need food" quickly became "I food" and finally "I," a single eye that watched the others eat pancakes and fake maple syrup with plastic knives and forks. So I squirreled away my hopelessness, my angst, my visions, and kept them locked in the murk of my mind.

When I was ill, I had everything in storage. They talk about keeping feelings "bottled up;" well, I kept myself in boxes, as if any day my mind would relocate to a new residence. I remember those boxes clearly, the smell of

the dusty cardboard, the translucent packing tape, and the pressure of boxes piled on top of each other, waiting and waiting for someone to come and move them to a better place.

When I was ill, I knew well the tap-tapping sound of nurses' shoes on tiled hospital hall floors, the hiss of the blood pressure device, the call: "Come get your *meds!*" I knew the sounds of the hospital at night: the whirl of the copy machine, the whispers of the night staff; I could even hear the turning of newspaper pages the night staff read when they tired of doing their "charts." Often, it was during those night hours, that if I were allowed, I would get up, dressed in a couple of johnnies, one facing forward, one backward, and go to the dining room, carrying a pad of paper and pen. A drip, and then a trickling stream of all that stored misery came out on paper.

It wasn't much at first, just a few words—perhaps they made sense—perhaps they didn't, it mattered little. I only stopped for a moment to heat up my leftover macaroni and cheese in the microwave, gobble it down, and wash it down with skimmed milk out of a carton. Then I returned to my writing.

As time passed, this became a gush and rush of emotion splattered on the pages of my journal. I tended to repeat myself from day to day: "I am Evil." "Everyone can see the Evil in me." "I cannot rid myself of Evil." As I passed from hospital ward to halfway house back to hospital ward, I brought my journal with me. Occasionally I shared pages with social workers and doctors who attempted to help me, but most I kept hidden in notebooks. I wrote profusely and with great fury and flurry, especially when I was smitten with

feeling. There was much I kept hidden in the pages of my journal; indeed, there was much jammed up in my head at the time, some pieces broken like china, packed improperly, and in haste.

Then I became well, which happened rather suddenly and dramatically. It was not due to any sort of medication, but rather an act of Nature, and Nature happened in a whirl, seemingly overnight, on my 40th birthday. Yes, I was still the embodiment of Evil, but the Evil Being that had lived in my head for years was suddenly gone. I was suddenly relieved of a tremendous weight. I lifted myself, feeling as though I could stand upright for the first time, my spine no longer hindered by curvature, by heaviness, by bone deterioration, by grief. I could breathe real air, not the stale air of illness I'd been breathing for so long, the air of hospitals and shrinks' offices and the stench of meals on trays that reeked of nursing home food.

And then I had nothing to hide anymore. I stopped keeping a journal. Eventually, I started a blog. There was just as much conflict to deal with in life, perhaps more, but there was less pressure, less to fight *against*. No Evil Being, no rash of stuff *in my head*. The outpouring of feeling stopped. I wrote pinched e-mails that lacked outbursts of unrestrained joy or tears. I suddenly found myself unable to cook up true *passion* as I had when I was ill.

I no longer had to fight against my own head and the Evil Being that lived there. I no longer had to fight, so I no longer had to push against myself, that isometric exercise I had completely forgotten about. A muscle that pushes against another gains more strength than one that simply pushes air, right? Is this why some people

complain that when they get well, they'll have no drive to write, no muscle? Is this why patients, particularly those that are the artsy sort, tend to go off their medications to deliberately fall back into illness, out of frustration because they want some of the passion they once had?

I, however, chose to stay in the realm of wellness, as madness scared the heck out of me. Even passion would not pull me back to where I was before. Did I create passionate work? You could say that I did; you could say that I did not. My concentration, organizational skills, memory, stamina, and confidence had all improved tenfold. Imagine: the interference in my head was gone, the Evil—gone, gone, gone! I could write a paragraph without someone telling me that it sucked. I could think my own thoughts. I could write my own words.

I wrote every day. I wrote a draft of a novel, then decided I wanted to go to school and study writing. This I could not have done in my illness days, in my days of heightened feeling, because passion itself would have betrayed me. I was able to concentrate on my school work and graduate college, go on to graduate school, and finish my master's degree. This I would not have been able to do had I been ill.

Do I miss the angst, the feeling, the passion of my illness days? Yes, I do, but not enough to give up what I had earned: wholeness. What I had now was so precious that I had to be sure to tread even ground to keep it upright, balanced, and fair. And what I had now was not dry; it was so dear to me, so sweet, so luscious and full. The boxes sprung open, and I relished their contents. I suckled. I slurped. What was once inside dribbled down my chin and onto my t-shirt, and though it wasn't the

same passion I'd known in earlier days, it sprung forth with magnificent beauty and weight, and it surrounded me with words that, pen in hand, I could at last comprehend.

Held captive by the aroma of it all, yet now freed by that same sweet scent, I was nourished tenfold, my belly warmed, the pages poked and gnawed at and scratched and dug out until they, too, blossomed. I wrote. I wrote well. And I found I had a reason to go on with it all.

I. Silence

1983

**A Forgotten Line:
Emergence**

Trapped. Double-crossed. I sat scrunched up on this hard bed, in this emergency room at Putnam Memorial Hospital, Bennington, Vermont, feeling those watchful eyes of my roommate upon me. She sat in a chair in the corner of the room. Footsteps moved outside the thin curtain that separated my cubicle from the rest of the emergency department at Putnam Memorial Hospital, and from the world. Simple questions, impossible: what is your name? Where do you live? What insurance do you have? *Mental* trouble, they said, something amiss. They had hush-hushed me into the corner cubicle, with the curly-haired, stethoscoped nurse. Irene pretended to be perplexed. I just took what hit me. The nurse talked at me gleefully, and suddenly, I was in another cubicle. Then Irene talked at me as well; they both chattered and I couldn't hear, couldn't understand the words that bubbled and broke before I could grasp them.

An alcohol-tainted breeze brushed across my face as the nurse exited the cubicle, ruffling the curtain. Irene leaned toward me and whispered, "Julie, you have to talk. Tell them about the bingeing. Tell them about the anxiety and the insomnia and everything. And the Martians. Everything. Tell them."

She wore cheap, girlish perfume. She tiptoed around the room, peeking in cabinets. "Any good drugs, do you think? Shit, there's gotta be something. Do they let people smoke

here? They have a nice *unit* upstairs, Julie. You'll like it. Don't worry, me and my boyfriend will take excellent care of your car while you're in." Irene stole a glance at the clock. "What the...they sure take their sweet time. Where's my lighter? Did you remember yours? Lemme see. Where's your pocketbook? What the—" Irene's eyes narrowed, spelling mistrust.

The curtain ruffled. "Don't worry, just me, girls," said the nurse, as she suddenly appeared back in the room. "What's so funny, Julie? What's the matter, anyway?" she asked. She blurred in and out of focus. "Why won't you talk?"

"Yeah, Julie. Talk." Irene tapped her glazed nail on a metal chair.

"Maybe Julie will talk to me alone," said the nurse.

"Julie needs me to interpret," said Irene. She pronounced "interpret" as though she had just learned the word from watching Oprah.

"Hello? Everyone decent in there?" A man's voice.

"Doctor's here," said the nurse, as if she were announcing the arrival of the daily mail. "Come on, Miss Parker. Time to come with me and let Julie and the doctor meet alone."

"Julie will feel better if I'm here, won't you, Julie? Julie?"

"Miss Parker, time to go." The nurse had her hand on her hip. "Miss Parker, Julie *must* meet with the doctor now. You *must* wait in the waiting room. Okay?"

Irene's heels thudded on the linoleum floor as she was escorted out to the chilly area beyond the curtains, out of sight. I could breathe now.

"So," said the doctor, his hands in his pockets.

I didn't even want to look at him. He had snake's eyes, and a man's smell. His blue tie shone like a knife in the center of his chest. It cut through his shirt and flashed about the room.

"Julie, we've called your mommy and daddy and they're coming to get you. Do you understand? You have no insurance. You have no job. What do you think you're doing, showing up here?" Hate.

You bastard you called my parents you violated my confidentiality I have no insurance I have no money but I know my rights you fucking liar. My breath came in short bursts. If I could speak aloud I knew I'd be screaming obscenities. I pulled away from the doctor.

"Not so fast. Do you know where you are? Do you know you're in a hospital?" Hate.

I nodded.

His voice was so loud that I thought I'd break apart from the sound of it. "Do you know who I am?" Hate. Cocksucker.

"I'm Dr. Beck. I'm the attending physician at the emergency room tonight. Turn around. Let me listen to your back." I still hadn't removed my clothes. I hadn't been asked to. The doctor—I immediately forgot his name—lifted my sweater gently. I gasped at the cold feel of the stethoscope I wasn't wearing a bra, but that didn't matter.

“I’m going to listen to your heart now.” The doctor placed his stethoscope between my breasts briefly, more a token gesture than diagnostic. I was there for psych, not my heart. Mutual understanding.

“Let me feel your neck.” I was afraid of his touch. I was afraid of his booming voice, everything about him, but his hands were gentle, though moist and cold. “Now your reflexes.”

The nurse peeked in, interrupting us. “Doctor, the Greenes want to talk to Scully again. Should I call him? It’s late, and—”

“They’ll have to wait.”

“Yes, doctor.” She disappeared.

He took my wrist. He held my hand for a long while, turned it this way and that, examined my fingers, and then my thumb. Did I want him to look further? He inched toward my wrist. I felt his fingers creep downward. Then I allowed myself to tremble, just barely perceptively.

“Wait just a minute,” he said. “What’s here?” I let my arm go limp. It was useless to put up a fight, and so far, I hadn’t done so at all. I was a puppet without strings. He tugged at my sleeve. “Hey, what’s this?” My cuts. Shit. No, no, doctor. This is private. This is *mine*. I made this exquisite mess. I toiled over these arms, composed them as I had composed my music. *Leave me alone, asshole*. He brought my sleeve down further, revealing more. Razor cuts, maybe thirty of them. I’d used several razor blades. When one had become dull, I’d switched to another, picking at skin, tugging on hairs, deeper, swifter, bloodier, a sting, then an ache. Some cuts were deep. These arrow-

shaped cuts pointed toward my hands. Blood oozed from the newer cuts. Those that had been there a while had already turned blue and ugly.

“So how long have you been doing this? How old are these cuts? A week ago? A month ago?”

They had someone watching me from then on, and as time passed I realized the switch had been flipped, that I was now being sent “upstairs,” mainly because the inevitable had occurred: someone—it might have been anyone—had seen my cuts.

Irene had never seen the cuts, no, not even she, my roommate, except once, a few weeks ago, in a fleeting moment, a sleeve pulled back the slightest bit. I hastily tugged it back, but she *saw*. She said, “Julie, that’s self-mutilation. They put people in the *hawspital* for that.”

It was hard to believe that only hours earlier I had been free, sitting with Irene in our drafty apartment, sharing coffee in cracked mugs. “Julie, you need *medicine*,” she had said. “Pills. The hospital is the way to get them. Scully didn’t pan out. *Think* about it. You’re a nervous wreck, like I was, before I got my *Ativan*. I need my *Ativan*. You need drugs, Julie. Bad.”

I ran my fingers along the lines of corduroy in the couch and said nothing.

“Look at you. Your hair’s a mess. You’re all shaky and scared. Me and Daniel can take care of the dog. We’ll take good care of your car. Come on, give me your car keys. I’ll drive you to the hospital.” She opened a compact mirror, examined her eyes, shut it, and then placed it in her purse.

“Come on,” she said. “Bring your cigarettes. There you go. And your lighter, too. Don’t forget the lighter.”

As Irene started the engine, she turned to me and said, “You’re in no shape to drive, you know.” I nodded. She adjusted the rearview mirror. “And I want to know *every* med they put you on, understand? It’s time, Julie. Enough is enough. The worst of it is that none of those *jackasses* over at United Counseling Services believe you’re sick. Like Megan. And that

Scully.”

Irene was right. I had been fighting an eating disorder, depression, and psychosis, and losing the battle, and the worst of it was that *nobody believed me*. The bingeing was such a disruption in my life that I was completely unable to go on. I felt as though it was caused by some outer force, not myself, but extraterrestrials that had somehow infiltrated me, and I wanted to die because of it all. Going to the hospital would be the last stop. This was the lowest of the low. I had tried, in every way I knew how, to get help, and all these methods had failed me. I had gone into therapy. I had tried day treatment in Boston for nine months. I had sought out a psychiatrist, a certain Dr. Scully, through my therapist, Megan. A month ago I had shown up for my therapy appointment with Megan, who had told me, with barely an apology, “Scully doesn’t want to see you this week. Next week.”

I could feel my face falling.

I slumped into my chair, defeated. “But that’s what he said last week. This is the...let’s see...seventh

time he’s put me off! Seventh!”

“He’s a busy man.” Megan lit a cigarette.

I glanced at my hands, wondering if I should light up, too. “What does Scully look like?”

“And why should you care?”

I said, “The bingeing is getting worse.”

Megan took a long drag on her cigarette. “You didn’t answer my question. And you know what I think? I think you worry about yourself too much.”

“Megan, I think I really need help,” I said quietly. “At night, I do this thing. With razor blades. With my wrists and arms.”

Megan said, “You can do *that* all you want. Just don’t kill yourself, okay? That could get messy for me.”

Somehow, I knew that what Megan was saying, and how Megan was handling my care was very, very wrong. But I had nowhere to turn, no one to confide in except Irene. Scully, who supervised Megan, continued to postpone appointments with me, until it became evident that he wasn’t going to meet with me at all, and my hopes were dashed of getting on medications that would help me any time soon. In December, Megan told me, as she lit her cigarette, “This is our last appointment.”

“You’re going on vacation for Christmas?” I was relieved not to have to see Megan for a week or so.

“No. Scully and I feel that you don’t need therapy anymore. Therapy is making you worse. I don’t know what else to do with you, so I’m just going to let you go.”

As Irene pulled into the handicapped parking space, I felt speech leave me altogether. Its very absence felt like an object to me, a possession. Lack of speech, *my* silence. I

could give and take and deal it as I chose, and I found this strangely comforting. It seemed, also, as if something was blocking my throat from making a speech sound. I tried to swallow the blockage, but it surfaced again and again.

Now, as the attendant wheeled me out of the cubicle, and “upstairs,” I recalled Irene’s words. “Maybe, if you show up at the hospital, in the shape you’re in,” she had said, “they’ll see that Scully made a bad mistake, and they’ll get what *I* think is proper care for you.”

1981

**At the Crossroads:
As Discrete as Possible**

“You have to understand. Some of the people here are very ill. They have just come out of, er, the *state* hospital.” The therapist, Diana, lowered her voice. “Metropolitan State Hospital, you see.” We were seated in a small office in what used to be a church rectory, where I would be attending day treatment. Diana leaned her arm against the large, unused desk beside her. She was dressed in a matching tweed skirt and blazer, and I, in an attempt to look presentable for my first day at Crossroads Day Treatment, wore a plaid shirt, fashionably worn jeans, and a denim vest I’d bought at a thrift shop and that I was convinced made me look thinner. Outside the office door, footsteps rumbled down the stairs. The window, to my right, was cracked open and a rusty October breeze slipped through, playfully sweeping the simple, white curtain to and fro. The weather was typical for Boston this time of year: cold in the mornings, but warming during the days, allowing for brilliant foliage, which did nothing to elevate my present mood. I felt pressured to say something in response to Diana’s comment, but I shrugged my shoulders, feeling stupid, and said nothing. “So you will be with all sorts of people, you know, during lunch and on Wednesdays when we have our outings. We, er, go in vans, all together, as a group.” Diana cleared her throat. I tried to look at her, but found my eyes resting instead on a green ceramic frog on the desk. She handed me a schedule of

groups. “Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays we have regular groups, with a two-hour lunch break. Group Therapy meets on Mondays and Fridays, with Rick. Don’t miss Group Therapy.”

The door opened. I jumped. A large man wearing a t-shirt and tie loomed in the doorway.

“Kevin, I am in a meeting with Julie now.”

“A new client?” Kevin’s voice was a deep, friendly basso. “That’s a pretty name. Julie. Julie. I like that!”

“Kevin, you can meet her later.”

“No, I want to meet her now. She’s a pretty girl. When do I get my meds?”

“You can ask Emily. She’s the nurse. See you later, Kevin.” Diana resumed her explanations, running her fingers along the pleat in her skirt. “Thursday the doctor comes. If you are going to be taking medication, you’ll meet with him then.”

Medication? At the time, it was beyond my perception that there were medications that might help me. My knowledge of psychotropic medication consisted of the sedative (“sedagive”) given to the Frankenstein monster in the movie *Young Frankenstein*. I had never heard of a pill you could take that would make you less depressed. Was this an antidepressant? I wondered how a pill could possibly elevate one’s mood, and what it would do to someone with a “normal” mood. How would it feel to take an antidepressant? Would it make me “happy?” Would an antidepressant stop the bingeing? What about my fears? I recalled when I was a Bennington student not long ago, standing at my apartment door, trembling, while my

landlord kindly offered vegetables: cucumbers, radishes, kohlrabi. I, terrified, took the vegetables, clutched them to my bosom, and hastily closed the door, perhaps too soon, and there was no reason, none! Would an antidepressant take away *that* terror? Would an antidepressant stop my core belief that I was rotten inside, the syrupy feeling that coated my innards until I exuded an odor of rot, the belief that I, Julie, was an Evil Person? Or would I need other sorts of medications for these problems? I wondered why medications like these hadn't been suggested for me in the past.

Diana said, "We have Family Issues group twice a week and Art Therapy in the building next door on Fridays. In the beginning of each day we all meet together for the Community Meeting, and at the end of the day for Wrap-Up. Each therapist meets with her or his own clients for Administrative Group in the morning as well. I'll be meeting with my clients here in the Blue Room." Rooms in the building were named after the subway lines in Boston: the Blue, Red, Green, and Orange Rooms. Group Therapy always took place in the Green Room.

"You mean, it's like a school, with different courses you can take? I think I'd like that."

Diana said, "No, not quite, Julie. This is a *therapeutic community*. The groups are—"

"It'll be a good transition back to Bennington next spring," I said enthusiastically. "I think my parents will be pleased that I've decided to come here."

Diana said, “Well, I’ve got things to do. Why don’t you look around, get yourself some coffee, and introduce yourself to people?”

At the words, “introduce yourself,” I winced. “I’ll try,” I said.

“Go on,” said Diana. “You can do it. See you in the Community Meeting.” And then, quite suddenly, she opened the door, and I was set loose at Crossroads Day Treatment to fend for myself before the first “group.”

My only mental health experience had been about six weeks of once-a-week therapy over the summer, but this was very different. I had never been to such a place before. I had never spoken to the other patients in the waiting room where I had seen my therapist. Because I generally saw her at the same time each week, I always saw the same people in the waiting room. I sat near a tight-lipped man with a briefcase who worked on the New York Times crossword puzzle every week (in pen). He stroked his nose periodically. Was he there for relationship problems, perhaps? A woman with a smoker’s cough brought her snotty child who cried incessantly, “Gimme, gimme!” I hated that he was missing a thumb. Why, I didn’t know. Yes, he had trouble in school, I knew. And who was I to them? A Bennington College student—spoiled, smart, and rather odd. Perhaps they asked themselves why this student was using the community mental health center instead of the counseling service at the college, or a private doctor in town. Though I knew these people didn’t know me, I hid my face inside my book, desperate to stay anonymous, and as discrete as possible.

It seemed that the people at Crossroads had wounds much deeper than anyone I'd seen in the counseling center waiting room, wounds of the mind. They'd been *hospitalized*, after all. One could call them—yes, one could call them *ill*, mentally ill. Perhaps someday a handful would recover. I had never thought of myself as ill before, was I? How long would I have to keep coming here? Would this program help me with my problems? Sure, once-a-week therapy had failed to solve the difficulties that had caused me to drop out of school the semester before graduation. I had never thought of myself as ill before, and would not for another three or four years, when more attempts at school failed. I would then tell my friends, “The schools discriminate against me because I am *crazy*.” Quite suddenly, beginning around 1985, several years after my first time at Crossroads, I *owned* craziness. It was my identity for a long, long time, and I could feel this craziness covering me like a heavy, metal-laden blanket that I couldn't kick off. Had I known, at that moment in 1981, at Crossroads Day Treatment, what would ensue over the next decade or so, I certainly would have reacted to my initiation differently. Instead, I decided to have a look around.

No one was in the living room, where the heat of the morning sun seemed oppressive. Surely, one could fall asleep on one of those soft-looking couches! Because the building was originally part of the church next door, it lacked the institutional feel I'd expected of a psychiatric facility. I noticed the trim was painted a dull tan, though, which spoiled the home-like look. Paintings hung on the

walls along with framed prints. Some looked like the type you'd find in offices, but several were original acrylics, drawn by a handful of talented clients and framed so that their names were concealed. This was for the sake of confidentiality, I was later to learn. Would my own painting someday be among them? I hoped not. As I walked toward the kitchen, I heard a man's voice. "Hey, here's someone new! I wonder what hospital she's from!" Then I looked down, and saw something brown, dirty, and wrinkly on the floor, in the corner by the door jamb: a single raisin.

1970 Hunger: Emergence

I hungered in a family that had plenty. My hunger was secret. My hunger was special. But when I was growing up, we had plenty of food. My mother made a point of always having meals ready, and the refrigerator was stocked: Kosher bologna, skimmed milk and whole “shake up” milk, apples, bosc pears, and d’anjou pears. In the freezer: vanilla, harlequin, and coffee ice milk. My mother kept soft oatmeal raisin bars and chocolate chip cookies in a yellow plastic breadbox high up on the kitchen counter. We had plenty to do besides school. Skating, drama, and dance lessons, Cub Scouts and Camp Fire Girls, and activities of all sorts kept us all too busy. We owned a three-quarters size Steinway grand piano for which there was constant competition. We played trumpet, flute, clarinet, violin, drums, and guitar among us, and we all sang, except for Dad, who was tone-deaf.

Even spiritually, our lives were plentiful. We attended synagogue and Hebrew school regularly, and observed holidays, religious and secular, filled with activities that were fun for children. The high point of the year may very well have been the eight days of Hanukkah when we were young, but this holiday was replaced in our own ranking, as we grew, by the Fourth of July and its carnival. The carnival! Not only did this festivity have a merry-go-round and Ferris wheel, but also the more challenging Twister. We kept physically fit. We climbed mountains in the summer and skied in the winter in New Hampshire and Vermont.

We had a beloved dog, Joffa, who dug holes under the fence several times a week, her muddy paws betraying her, holes that had to be filled with rocks so that she couldn't dig there again and again. We talked, played, experimented, created.

And yet I felt empty.

I especially felt it on Friday nights, as Mother blessed the Sabbath candles and the challah bread, as the sun set and Dad finally put down *The Boston Evening Globe* and said to my two brothers and me,

“Eat up! Little children are starving in Biafra!”

“I'll give you each your proper portions,” Mother cried. “Not too much for Dad, cut up like cobblestones for Philip, thinly sliced for Julie...”

But it wasn't about the food, or the gifts we were given, or the book-learning we acquired. It was about the absence of love, the meaninglessness of those blessings over the candles, while Mother told us to close our eyes, and then open them again, as if the candles had suddenly disappeared and then reappeared. Surely we saw through it all. I kept my hunger hidden and told no one. My hunger grew and grew until it became more than I could bear; even after I left home the hunger followed me, grew in me. What was a pressure or gnawing became a grotesque and horrifying abyss.

I would hear it at night. There was a maple tree just outside my bedroom window that had overgrown and was poking against the side of the house. I had plans to escape via that tree, on the big day when I was to run away from home for good. The branch was within feet of my window,

and some of its leaves pressed against the screens, appearing as though they were painted on canvas. When the wind blew, and especially during storms, the leaves battered my windows angrily, over and over. They sounded like snare drums. And it was then that I heard the roar, a distant rumble of a semi-trailer on the Interstate, the gnashing of eighteen wheels on endless tarmac, headed west, too far away to be heard by my human ears, yet I heard it calling me, over and over.

I was the oldest of three. I adored my two brothers and did my best to protect them from all the Evil of the World as I saw it. Evil was everywhere, and I knew this because I'd experienced it—at school, at home, in the universe. I was the first to test the waters. It was my job to keep my brothers from falling into the traps I'd encountered, to shelter them from harm, to maintain purity in their day-to-day dealings, to make sure at all costs that my brothers were free from pain. If one was stung by a bee it was my fault. If one was teased at school I was surely to blame. I considered myself responsible for their lessons to an extent, and if one did poorly I chastised myself.

I remember teaching my brother Ned, who was called Neddy, to read, the summer before he was to enter first grade, using large flash cards. We—my parents, brothers, and I—were traveling across the country to see the world. While the cornfields flew by, Neddy read, “hare,” “dare,” “stare,” “care,” while Philip counted telephone poles, my father drove, and my mother dozed off.

“Plate...state...hate...late...”

I was the first to be told that our puppy had died. I cried. My tears made welts in my eyes that I felt the entire first day of seventh grade, and when I came home that day, I ate cottage cheese with a big spoon, the mess slobbering onto our plastic tablecloth. It tasted as though it had soured. I wanted to warn my unsuspecting brothers against eating it. “Nonsense,” my mother chastised. “It hasn’t spoiled. It only tastes that way because you’re sad.”

Only recently did I come to realize that I had been so familiar with the feeling of hunger, emptiness, deficiency, and inadequacy that I had accepted this state as normal. But it is not my intention to place blame on my parents for this. During those rare moments when I was relieved of this burden of hunger and emptiness, I was so overwhelmed that I couldn’t help but weep at the brilliancy of color that rushed over me when my hunger was satisfied, the simultaneous joy and terror that flushed through me like a splash of vermilion on wet, white paper.

I didn’t find love in the refrigerator, or the television (not even Perry Mason satisfied me), or at the dinner table, where my parents read the paper and argued about President Johnson during mealtimes over pot roast and watery gravy. I certainly didn’t find love at Hebrew school, or on the top of a mountain, no matter how beautiful the view, no matter which of my father’s arbitrary 4,000-footer classified Appalachian White Mountains of New Hampshire it was (they all looked alike to me). To make things worse, I did experience little teases of love, enough to show me what love was. I am thinking of a time, as a child, when I rode the frigid chairlift at Killington with my

father, and he pulled a small box-shaped object wrapped in paper out of his pocket. A Chunky Bar! Pure chocolate!

“Dad,” I said, “you’re allergic, remember?”

“One little bite won’t hurt,” he said. He unwrapped the bar. The snow whirled around us and rattled our ski poles.

“Get rid of the evidence,” I said, “before Mom sees it.”

Dad took the wrapper out of his pocket. “You hide it,” he said. “Put it deep in your pocket.” He split the bar and gave me half.

“The ideal chairlift meal,” I said, between bites.

“Mmm.”

We skied off the chairlift and into the world.

Perhaps it was the occasional glimpse of my mother’s long, brown hair as she brushed it in front of her full-length mirror in the bedroom before putting it all on top of her head in a bun. Perhaps it was the occasional glimpse of her breast as my brother suckled. Or the casual pat on the shoulder my father gave to her while she consulted *The Joy of Cooking*, or a secret Kosher recipe passed down through the generations. Perhaps I tasted closeness when I read prayers from the Haggadah, not in Hebrew school, but when I’d taken one of our own Haggadoth after the Passover meal was finished, the Afikoman found, the shank bone put away, and we had all retired, and I brought the Haggadah upstairs to my room, secretly, to read and study. I carefully held the yellow cover and worn pages, and for a fleeting moment, wished I was a boy. Why was this night different from all other nights? And what was it then that frightened me so much? Was it because then, at that moment, I tasted love?

1975

The Graduate

My father set down his copy of *The Boston Evening Globe* and picked up his dessert spoon. “Erna, let’s have a party for Julie and Cat. A high school graduation party. We’ll invite Cat’s parents.”

“Hmm, let’s do it! Hurrah!” said my mother. She threw her arms into the air.

“A great idea,” my father said.

My mother spun around in her chair. “The girls are graduating. Of course, Julie will come home from college every weekend. Or most weekends, right,

Julie?”

I had a feeling my mother wasn’t really expecting me to answer, so I didn’t say anything.

“Of course,” she said, answering her own question nervously.

“She’s playing in the UMass marching band. Cat is playing in her marching band as well,” she continued. “The two girls are so much alike. Philip! Neddy! Oh, the boys! Philip! Neddy! Julie, the Peter Pan Bus comes directly from Amherst to Riverside Station and I can pick you up. Simple! Understand?”

I bowed my head. I picked up three strands of tablecloth fringe and began to braid them, strands like the hairs on my head, each over the other, slowly, patiently, then decided to make more braids, four strands together, then five. There was a rhythm to it: *Mom and Dad. Dad and Mom. Mom and Dad. Dad and Mom.* I twisted my fingers together and

untwisted them, and crossed my legs and uncrossed them, crossed them again, and double-crossed them, wondering if they could get stuck that way. Then I felt the ring on my pinky finger that Cat had given me. I wondered if I'd ever have the guts to take it off. I thought about the shirt Cat had given me and ordered me to wear, on which was imprinted the word SLAVE.

“So why don't I get you a Peter Pan Bus schedule, Julie?”

“Uh, sure, fine, Mom.”

My father said, “Be sure to take the bus. Don't ever hitchhike.”

“Sure, Dad.” I swallowed, taking out all the braids. If I liked him more, maybe I would have told him my plans to get my own dog someday.

“Philip, Neddy! Time for dessert! Oh, the boys!”

1981

**At the Crossroads:
Discovery**

I came into the Crossroads Day Treatment kitchen where ten or twelve clients had already arrived, and several were strutting nervously. The room was equipped with a number of appliances, and coffee was brewing. For fifty cents one could enjoy a cup with Cremora and sugar or Sweet 'n' Low. I remembered wistfully the strong coffee that I had made for myself in my tiny apartment in North Bennington, Vermont, only months previously, where I had attended Bennington College. I had always drunk it black, never with cream or milk, and certainly never with Cremora. Surely, here in Boston, I would not alter my coffee habits!

A sign above the kitchen doorway clearly indicated that the dining room was the only room where smoking was allowed. It appeared that the dining room was also the main social room, with its pine wood tables and chairs, paper ashtrays strategically placed at each table, and a large wastebasket near the door. The dining room was wood paneled and a clock—accurate, I was told—hung on the far wall. Two older women sat quietly drinking coffee in the corner of the room. I later would see them in Group Therapy. I returned to the living room. Smoke from the dining room made visible beams of light stream in through the sheer front curtains. Kevin lay fast asleep on the couch, his shirt sliding up exposing his fat, bare belly, his tie under his armpit. He snored loudly. How did he get in there so fast? I tiptoed back to the entry of the dining room, where

much of the activity had started up. A woman who appeared to have Down's Syndrome repeated,

"Tim! Tim! Tim!"

The client named Tim D turned to her and said, "Tina, shut up. You're embarrassing me in front of the ladies here." He was a large man. Looking around, I noticed that everyone seemed overweight. I was later to learn that almost all psychotropic medications caused weight gain. Tim, who carried all his weight in his belly, was sweating profusely. He wore a filthy sweatshirt jacket, but I sensed that his sweating came more from nervousness than from overheating. His leg bounced up and down while he sat, fidgety, in his chair. "And this one is Julie. She's new. You look too pretty and too smart to be here, Julie. You're smart, right? You look plenty smart. You don't smoke? You Jewish? I can tell. Shawlom. I know a chosen one when I see one. In the end, all the Jews will convert and Christ will lead them. It says in the Bible! Right, guys? You don't smoke? Why don't you have one of these donuts?"

The goodies were scattered on a plate at a nearby table. Clients had already eaten half of them, and had left crumbs. Grease splotches surrounded each sugar-topped donut as if the oil had sloughed off indiscriminately, like rain on a windowpane. Calories. "No thanks," I said.

"You're a smart girl," said Tim. "You're too smart to be at Crossroads. You should get out while you can.

Right, guys? It says in the Bible—"

"I-I-I j-j-just wish he'd stop t-t-talking about the Bb-bible," a young man's voice said from the kitchen. I leaned

over and saw a very tall bearded man shaking his arm in front of him while he spoke. “W-w-where’s Emily?”

“It depends on what you mean by television,” said Richie S. “Have a cigarette.” But he didn’t offer me one, and I didn’t want one. I hadn’t yet entered the dining room, and he in fact was not looking at me, but staring at nothing, or perhaps at a piece of dust in front of his face. Richie’s facial expression never changed; he was always profoundly troubled.

Tim continued. “Betcha don’t smoke. You’re too smart to smoke.”

“No, I don’t,” I admitted. I would learn that Tim was one of only a handful who could sustain a conversation besides the members of Group Therapy. Tim was sometimes a comfort. His belly-laugh, the way he shoved his hands in his pockets while he walked, and his use of the word “wicked” all became lovingly familiar to me.

“You know,” I would say to Diana, months later, after a long Art Therapy session, “when people talk, it’s like layers upon layers of depth. Some of the people here talk in riddles, different layers of riddles.”

“They’re confused, Julie.” Diana dropped a handful of paintbrushes into a box.

“But that’s a layer, too,” I said. And I loved Tim for all his layers.

Now, after I had quietly refused Tim’s cigarette, he said, “Everyone here smokes. Want one, Richie? Take one. Here.” He handed Richie a Parliament, then lit one for himself. “Nicky doesn’t. He shakes too much. Emily, she’s

the nurse, she told him he'd better give it up or else he might set the place on fire. Blow the place up."

Richie began to laugh, smoke emitting from his wide-open mouth. "Blow the place up, that's very funny, blow the place up, ho ho, ho ho!" He coughed, then gathered up spittle, and spat into an ashtray.

I closed my eyes for a moment.

Tim asked me, "What hospital you come out of?"

Waltham? St. E.'s?"

"Huh?"

"Where were you locked up?"

People arrived in the kitchen laughing. At what, I wondered.

"Um, I wasn't. I just got here to this program, just now."

"Depression?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Sucks, huh? A nice, smart girl like you, in a place like this."

I remained standing in the doorway of the dining room, afraid to enter. One by one, several clients turned toward me, looked me over, then sat at tables, removed cigarettes from pockets and pocketbooks, and lit up.

A man stepped in who looked like he was one of the therapists. I asked him, "You don't happen to know what time I'm supposed to meet with Diana later this afternoon, do you?"

"You're the new girl," he said, backing away from me.

"Yes. Julie."

“Oh. I see.” He fluttered his hands nervously. Then I realized that he was not one of the staff. No, he was in fact a client.

He nodded toward the clients in the dining room. “Don’t mind them,” he whispered. “They’re Met people.”

“Hey, Jackson, got a new girlfriend?” It was Tim, calling out to us playfully, but Jackson sneered at Tim with venom. Tim’s eyes widened. “Sorry,” he said.

Jackson pulled me aside. “They’re Met people, all of them, or just about. That’s what *I* call them.”

“Huh?”

“Met State. The Met. They come from Metropolitan State Hospital.”

“You mean that place near McLean Hospital? Near the Fernald School for retarded kids?”

I pictured it clearly. While attending Crossroads Day Treatment, I would drive past the place nearly every morning! The Metropolitan State Hospital was marked with a dilapidated old wooden sign, white with black letters, and the buildings were set away from the road. If you drove the road first thing in the morning, mist rose from the pavement like an afterthought. Once, I drove by slowly, and noticed that past the front building was a yard enclosed by a chain-link fence. Up ahead was more conservation land. Indeed, the hospital was surrounded by wetlands. When I turned right onto Mill Street, McLean Hospital stood stately to my left, on a steep hill. To my right was the duck pond, where, years later, I would stand on the banks, pale and thin, and feed the ducks Wonder Bread.

Jackson said, “Yep, that’s the place. Met State. Near McLean. Creepy. I’ve never been there. Not me. I’m not a Met person, oh no, and I know *you’re* not one, either. We should stick together, me and you. And Irene, too. She’s not here yet. Everyone from Group Therapy.

The place is Hell, I’m telling you, Hell. Don’t go there.”

“Really?”

“I’ve heard they have cockroaches and rats. The food is inedible. The workers are all foreigners. Negroes. I heard they’re really strong and beat you up if you don’t behave, even if you’re a girl. They don’t give a shit. You get shock treatments and heavy tranquilizers until you’re a zombie, and you get tied down to a bed for *hours* with leather straps. They even have real straitjackets, the old-fashioned kind like in the movies.” Jackson panted. I wondered if all this was true. “You’re locked in, and only the staff have the keys. People spend *years* there, never seeing daylight.”

“Oh my *god*.”

“Don’t go there. Please, *please*, be the exception. You are pretty.”

“I am *not* pretty, not really.” Too fat, I thought wryly.

“Pretty enough,” said Jackson. “Listen to me: Get out of here alive. Lie if you have to. Just don’t become *one of us*.”

1983

**A Forgotten Line:
Word Find**

Dressed in merely a johnny, I felt a chill in the air as I was wheeled from the emergency room to one of the upper floors, and toward the desk in what appeared to be the main area of the psychiatric unit. Putnam Memorial Hospital was a small community hospital in Bennington, Vermont. The psychiatric unit was one of many specialized units at the hospital, such as the maternity, pediatrics, and orthopedics units. Right now, this unit felt like the scariest of them all, the end of the line. The lights were darkened and only a small light shone at the desk. I gripped the arms of the wheelchair tightly. A phone rang and the nurse at the desk popped awake. Apparently she'd been dozing with a newspaper crossword puzzle, pen in hand. She murmured, "Thank you, thank you," and then turned to me and said, "You're in room 401, bed A." She walked past me and into a small office. Lights turned on. I shielded my eyes. She came back out with a cup of coffee. She huffed and puffed as she stepped back toward me, as if it took some effort to walk around. The person who had wheeled me up, meanwhile, had disappeared. When the nurse came close, I noticed her dark, hairy moustache, and the hint of a sour odor.

Another young nurse came through the same swinging doors that I had come through, saying, "Rita, do you want to go down now?"

"No," Rita said, "I've got an admit."

“Where? I didn’t see a patient come in. This late?”

“This young lady over here. Cat’s got ’er tongue and she looks filthy. I told you,” she said, turning to me, “room 401, bed A. I’ll be in in a minute.”

I stood.

“Here are your clothes and your bag. Wait a minute.”

Rita began to giggle. “Judy, have you ever seen anything like it?”

“Huh?” Judy asked.

“They only gave her one johnny. Julie, get someone to bring in some nightclothes for you. You’re exposed in the back. And tomorrow, wear a bra. She came in wearing no bra, nothing, Judy. *Her* wearing no bra.”

“Oh Jesus.”

“Not *that* room! That’s Jonathan’s room, 401. Don’t you listen?”

“Denise can cover at 2:15, if you want to go down then.”

“Could light up one right now. Well, no, 2:15 is fine, I’ll get this girl settled. Bed A! Do you have that Word Find book?”

“Lost it. Sorry.”

Rita decided to fill out the intake form herself, because I was silent and terrified. She held the form on a clipboard as she checked off each item. “‘Patient did not bring any valuables...’ Julie, you didn’t bring any valuables, right? Just nod your head. There you go. Okay, not allergic to any drugs, right? Not allergic to latex. What about food, allergic to food? Naw. What time do you wake up? I’ll put seven in the morning. You’re all set. Go to sleep.”

If the bed had come with a headboard, I would have banged my head against it. In its absence there was the wall, but instead, I buried my head under the pillow and tried to pray. I tried to say the Lord's Prayer but I couldn't remember the words. God would know I was a sinner because I was a Jew and Jews were not supposed to utter the Lord's Prayer. We were not even supposed to know the Lord's Prayer existed. I got stuck on "Forgive us our trespasses." The pillowcase wasn't soft, like a pillowcase you'd find at home; it was scratchy and over-bleached. Christ, I couldn't even pray right. I wiped my snot on the pillowcase and brought my head up. The cold air overwhelmed me to tears even though I was too terrified to cry. It seemed that my tears were too large for my eyes. They dropped onto my johnny and I felt that I was spitting out my teeth, spitting out all the ugliness and horror I'd seen that day, and the everpresent eyes of Irene, my roommate, watching over me as I sat in the emergency room. I felt, also, that I was spitting out the doctor's hateful booming voice. *We've called your mommy and daddy...* I spat it all out, and heard my hospital roommate roll in her sleep. A breeze gently blew in the room, shifting the curtain between us a bit, and she rolled again. I lay down and tried to be silent. The curtain moved again and a beam of light seized the darkness—ahh! I clenched my teeth and felt my eyes widen, my whole body on the defensive. It was Rita with a flashlight.

"Just checking on you," said Rita. "You should be asleep by now."

Sleep? Sleep wouldn't come to me, not in this strange place, this place so foreign that smelled so different from home. Home! Home smelled like our wood floors, like cigarette smoke, and like Hoofy, my dog. Home also reeked of the booze Irene drank—a stench I had learned to despise. I rolled over and tried to think of other things.

1961

Off Limits

She cooks while I play. “Roast beef! Corn-on-the-cob! Brussels sprouts!” she cries. I play with my truck. I long for my other toy, my orange ball, but it rolled away, down the hill, and onto the Forbidden Road, so I cannot have it anymore.

“Look, watch me shake up the milk!” she shouts. She demonstrates, holding the paper lid tight on the glass bottle, shaking vigorously until the cream cannot be distinguished from the rest of the milk, and I am saddened by this mixing of elements. It seems unfair that I cannot see the different facets of milk anymore.

“Now, I will water the plants!” She seems to be singing. “Full measure for this spider plant!” I dump a load of bricks off the back of my truck. I vroom the truck around the chair legs and toward the garbage pail.

“Quarter measure for the snake plant!”

She had warned me that the Forbidden Road was Off Limits. She said, “Only grown-ups can go down that road.” I figure the road has secrets, the secret to life, something

one must understand in order to live well and not get teased by others.

“A bit for the Christmas cactus!” she says with a flourish. I can no longer hear the yellow plastic clock on the wall. She says, “Oh, this damn table!” My truck leaps to the windowsill. The curtain, slightly ripped at the hem, makes way for my excavation.

I long to ride to my orange ball, down, down the Forbidden Road.

She waters the African violet, the aloe, the Chinese evergreen, the jade. She switches on the classical station, loud. It is time for the news. She sorts through the mail. President Kennedy is talking about sending a man to the moon. “Temple Sisterhood. They are having a meeting. I must put it on my calendar. Oh, the corn!”

My truck climbs up the crack in the window. A commercial comes on for luxury lighting fixtures.

Rushing to tend to the corn, she grabs a potholder, and picks up the pot-top. Steam rises, like when they take showers in the bathroom. She is back to her mail. “United Way, okay. Town public works, what could this be about?” She is not expecting an answer from me; I do not give her one. Mozart piano concerto on the radio. She turns it up louder. I swish my truck to the dishwasher, which she has moved near the sink.

“No! No! Julie! No! Bad girl! Those dishes will break!” She goes back to her mail. “American Cancer Society, League of Women Voters—”

The door slams. “What’s for supper?” His voice. She quickly turns the radio off.

“Oh, Honey, we *must* get a *round* table, I just can’t *stand* this rectangular one!”

“What’s for supper?”

“How was work?”

“Norm’s father died. I’ve got the evening paper. What’s for dessert?”

“Norm who? Roast beef! Corn-on-the-cob! Oh, the meat!” She rushes to the oven. He sits, opens the paper, reads. She says, “The meat is a little well done! The Brussels sprouts are nice and soft! You’ve got mail!

I tried to sort it.”

“Norm Kapenski. There was a march in Tennessee against segregation.”

“We gave to the NAACP last month. Julie! Stay away from that dishwasher! The Temple is having a rummage sale. I’ve got hermit cookies for dessert! Your favorite! Remember, they’re Off Limits until you eat all your main course and your fruit! Julie! Sit for supper,

Julie! Now!”

I vroom my truck to my chair.

“Julie, sit!”

I sit on the floor. I want my ball back. Down the Forbidden Road is the secret to life, something special, just for me, that they keep hidden from me. They say, “Beware the Forbidden Road!” What is so scary about it, and why is it forbidden? I remember watching the ball roll down the hill, over the bumps in our street, past the next door neighbor’s, I ran and ran, but then it rolled past the stop sign, further, further, under a kid’s bike and then onto the

Forbidden Road. Somehow, I know now that the secret of the Forbidden Road is one that I will never, ever learn.

“Julie, sit! Come on!”

I do not budge. She serves him his roast beef, corn-on-the-cob, Brussels sprouts, and some for herself. “Easy on the butter!” she says to him. “We don’t want any fatties around here! Julie, I’ve cut yours up very, very small. Sit on the chair, not the floor!”

I do not move. She kneels beside me and places the plate on my chair. Cupping my head in her right hand, she spoons the food into my mouth with her left, piece by piece. “Eat your food,” she says. “Eat. Children are starving in other parts of the world. You don’t know how awful it is. Eat.”

1975

The Graduate

I had been counting the weeks, now the days. Lexington High School was done with. I would soon be a student at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. I repeated the words over and over: “University of Massachusetts...” The place sounded so grand, so *important*. My packing was nearly complete. I stepped carefully among the dark green plastic trash bags and boxes full of belongings to my closet to add more clothes: a dress shirt and a pair of black wool sailor pants—surely, I’d have use for them, as an outfit for a performance perhaps—and stuffed these clothes into the box our new Zenith color TV had come in. One of the bags was ripped, revealing a bra strap. No matter. I tucked the bra back in again and hoped the hole would get no larger, then, on second thought, grabbed another bag. I’d asked my mother for the entire roll of bags, much to her bewilderment and consternation. I put the second bag around the first, thereby securing the contents. I had told my parents that it was entirely appropriate to bring *all* my belongings to college with me. They would be put to good use, I reassured them, especially the old Royal typewriter.

In my journal I wrote, “I’ll never make another friend again. Promise.” I felt the corners of the paper against my palm, and squeezed the pen. *Promise*. It felt like a deal done.

Right in the middle of my desk was a Peter Pan Bus schedule. What could be more obvious? My mother had not been subtle about placing it there. I opened it and scanned it

briefly. Several trips ran between Amherst and Riverside Station every day, extra on Fridays and Sundays for UMass students. How handy. In one motion, I ripped up the schedule and buried the pieces in the trash. “There, that’s done with.” I sat there and laughed for a good long time.

I wrote, “Someday, I will hitch-hike to California with a dog, take a lot of drugs, and join a commune.”

I balanced my high school diploma on my knees. It felt ghost-like and tingly. It was as fleeting and temporary as a piece of dust. My father wouldn’t notice it gone. Eventually, he’d forget that he had hoped to frame it.

1981

**At the Crossroads:
How I Got There**

Now that I'd come to Crossroads Day Treatment, my life was infinitely different from the life I left in Vermont. I had been a strong music composition student and trumpet player. My instructors had called me "an outstanding participant in the music program," and my departure had caused quite a stir and a lot of talk among faculty and students in the Division. Was I pregnant? Getting married? Having an affair with someone on the faculty? Bennington was a small college. Everyone in the Music Division knew everyone else. I had left in August, telling only bits and pieces of my story to a handful of people, among them my advisor, Jack Levin, and quietly left Bennington to move back to Massachusetts and live with my parents again.

I immediately started once-a-week individual psychotherapy, but found it wasn't working for me. By chance I overheard my exasperated parents talking after dinner one night about the Bach's daughter, Sandra, who had attended Crossroads Day Treatment.

"A good Jewish girl," my mother was saying.

"So she really got good results from this therapy?"

"It's a 'program,' Alan," my mother said. "A special program."

"Let's get Sandra on the phone to talk to Julie."

I took the call upstairs. As we spoke, I began to see Crossroads as my only hope. "I had Diana, while I was there," Sandra said. "You are assigned to one person that

you meet with once a week. The rest of the time, it's all groups. Also," Sandra continued, "there are a lot of people at Crossroads who come from the state hospital." I watched an ant crawl across my father's desk. "They talk to themselves. You just have to tolerate it. After a while, it's like they're not even there."

1981

Family Therapy

“Julie’s not right with herself,” was how my mother put it during our first family session with Diana. I’d been at Crossroads Day Treatment for about a month.

Diana asked, “Mrs. Greene, could you clarify?”

My mother waved her arms around dramatically.

“She doesn’t like herself, that’s all!”

“Erna,” said my father, “let the therapist talk.”

My mother went on. “Julie screams at us! Throws things! She raids the cookie bin when nobody’s around!” My mother set her arms back into her lap and said quietly, “You know, I’ve had to lock up the hermit cookies, giant oatmeal raisin cookies, and lemon squares in the liquor cabinet to keep *her* from eating them all!”

My father said, “What’s with all this eating, anyway? Why can’t she just stop it? Erna lets us each have one or two cookies with dinner, and that’s all.”

“And they’re not allowed cookies until after their fruit!” My mother crossed her arms emphatically.

“It’s a rule in *our family*.”

Diana interjected, “Mr. and Mrs. Greene, you both seem very—”

“We’re not *angry*,” my mother wailed, “we’re just concerned!” She threw her arms in the air. “She doesn’t get any *exercise*! She’s getting to be a fattie!”

“Exercise is very important!”

“And she drinks *coffee* all day long! Coffee! Bad for you!”

My father cleared his throat. “Since she left school and moved in with us, she’s completely abandoned her studies.”

My mother said, “She hasn’t touched a piece of music composition paper—”

“Or her trumpet.” My parents nodded in agreement.

“Julie,” demanded my father, “when are you going to quit smoking?” He turned to Diana, who was holding her hands out in a “T”—“time out.” He ignored

her. “And she’s friends with this *Irene!*”

“My God! Irene!”

“Irene’s not a proper girl. Uneducated.”

“Irene’s not a good influence on Julie,” said my mother, her hands on her hips. “She *smokes!* My God!”

“Very bad influence!”

“Julie says Irene is a *light* smoker, but—”

“Smoking is smoking, dammit!”

There was a pause, and then Diana said, “There is no reason to raise our voices here, Mr. Greene.”

“No, and I don’t think she’s Jewish, either,” my father muttered.

“Julie’s old enough to choose her own friends,” said my mother. “Why Irene?”

My father said, “Why can’t she be friends with Sandra Bach, who used to come here to Crossroads? Sandra studies at Brandeis University, and she goes to our Temple—”

“Alan, we can’t choose Julie’s friends for her, can we?”

“And if we don’t?” my father said loudly. “Look what happened to—”

“Phil and Ned are *adults*, Alan!”

“They’re dating shiksas!”

I had long since buried my face in my hands. At last, Diana turned to me and said, “Julie, what would you like to say to your parents?”

I shook my head, and did not look up.

“Julie, you have this opportunity,” said Diana.

“What would you like to tell them?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Nothing at all.”

Later, I sat with Diana in the Blue room. I was crying softly. “Now I see what you mean,” Diana said.

“Have they always been like this?” I nodded.

“Your parents don’t listen, do they? Did they ever?”

I shook my head.

“They seem so closed-minded about Irene. But I’ll bet you’re just glad to have a friend, aren’t you? Someone you can talk to. Someone who listens. You know, a person only has a handful of really good friends in a lifetime.”

“You really think so?”

“I know so.”

I wiped my eyes. “I haven’t had a friend in so long. I haven’t been able to confide in anyone. All that time I was at Bennington, I never really opened up. I didn’t tell anyone anything, really. Like I started having problems way back. I kept it a secret and didn’t say a word until I was forced to.”

“I think you’ve found one of those special friends, Julie. At last. Right here at Crossroads. A true friend, someone you can *really* trust.”

1974

Locker #47:

A Search for Love

“Cat wants you for something. You’d better go see her. She’s *mad*.”

“What? Where is she? What does she want?”

“Beats me.”

The kid disappeared between a wall of other students. I hadn’t a clue where Cat was, but right now she had French way down the other end of the high school, so I banked on the fact that she never missed a class, and concluded that I was safe, for now. I slipped into Schatz’s CW.

People said I had writing talent and should take Dr. Schatz’s Creative Writing class, which unfortunately turned out to be a dud. Every class was like a study hall. I sat in the back of the room, bored, but I wasn’t bored now. I was unraveled just hearing Cat’s name spoken aloud: *She wants me. She’s mad*. On a normal day in this class, I would spend my time writing letters to her instead of getting myself into more creative pursuits, which put my grade into the failing range. Cat insisted on my writing these letters. She insisted on a handwritten letter every day, even on weekends and holidays, even on Yom Kippur, when I was starving and had to be in Temple all day. She wanted long letters full of sappy prose from me. It took hours to write each letter, and generally the only time I could write to her was at times like these, when I needed to be doing something for *myself*.

Legend had it that Dr. Schatz, our teacher, couldn’t use his Ph.D. at a college because he drank too much. Kids said

that he hid his bottles in his suit jacket pocket, but no one knew if that was true or not, and I didn't dare get that close to him to be able to smell booze on his breath. Schatz was there to help us if we needed it, but no one ever asked for help. The class consisted of study hour, during which we were to write, and then hand in our projects whenever they were finished. I had finished nothing. I hadn't even started anything. *Cat wants twelve pages. Her self-pity crap I'd like to slap in the face. But her anger terrifies me.*

Like with Judy and the stick. It was only a few days ago. Cat had picked up a stupid stick off the ground, and was playing with the stupid stick that meant nothing to her, or so I thought, and then along came Judy B, a decent kid in our class, a girl I thought Cat liked. Judy was smart. Actually, she was waiting on an early decision from Smith College. She was carrying a bunch of books on her back.

"Hey, Judy!" Cat called out to her. Cat flicked her blonde hair back behind her ears. I loved it when she did that, but today, I hated her for making me love her.

"That's Judy?" I asked.

"Yes, stupid, can't you see? You're so blind!"

"My glasses are dirty." I stopped to wipe them with my sleeve.

"Don't do that. Hurry up. Let's go. You're so slow. Hey, Judy! Judy!"

Judy's freckled face appeared worried. "Cat," she said, "when are you going to stop bossing Julie around? And what are you doing with that stick?" Did Judy suspect Cat would hit me with the stick? Did she *know* about the

physical part of the abuse? Did anyone suspect? I planted my feet into the ground. This was going to be scary.

“It’s *my* stick” said Cat. “I can do anything I want with it.”

Judy took a step forward between Cat and me.

“It’s *my* stick,” Cat reiterated. “And if you break it, I will *never* speak to you again.” It was so easy to provoke Cat, so easy to incur her wrath. What if I did something wrong, what if she never spoke to *me* again? Would this be a good thing, or would I be lost without her, without direction or purpose?

Judy said to Cat, “You are so immature.” She grabbed the stick out of Cat’s hands and broke it in two. Judy must have been shocked, watching the two of us, Cat leading the way, her arms folded in front of her, and I dutifully following the required three paces behind. “Hurry up, slave,” said Cat. “This is all your fault. I’m so *angry* and *hurt* inside. I’m hurt because of *you*. I’m going to cry because of *you*. I want you to skip French this afternoon and come help me with my car. I’ll make you carry the tools and hand them to me. And if anything

goes wrong, it’ll be *your* fault. Okay? Deal?”

“I have a French exam.”

“Skip it.”

“But—”

“Julie, I *order* you to skip French. Listen. I am very angry, and I might start crying, and it’ll be all your fault, and all your family’s fault, so you’d better do as you’re told.”

“Okay, okay.”

“Remember, I might hit you, too.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Stupid stick.”

Cat’s grueling auto repair sessions generally started in the afternoons and lasted well into the evenings. She changed the oil, did tune-ups, replaced mufflers and the like, yelling at me the entire time. At 5:30 her father came home, and you’d think things would improve, having an *adult* around, but Mr. N went right along with Cat’s scheme.

A few nights ago, he said, “Get the Julius to open the oil cans!” He always referred to me as “the Julius.”

“W-where’s the opener?” I asked.

“There’s no opener,” said Cat. “You’re so *stupid*.”

It’s a spout. A pouring spout. Bring it to me.”

“The Julius can be thick-headed,” said Mr. N.

“Get it, now!” said Cat. This sent me scrambling around the dark garage. I couldn’t find the pouring spout, and said so, knowing I’d be berated further.

I heard footsteps, barely perceptible, in the adjacent basement. The door opened. Tina, Cat’s older sister, stepped in, as quiet as the ticking of a watch.

“And her!” said Cat, pointing to Tina. “She’s as skinny as Twiggy! Skinnier! Huh, Dad. Ever since she went on this diet thing!”

“Skinnier...” Mr. N echoed.

A voice from upstairs. “Cat, Tina, supper! Tina, you’d better eat! Tell Julie it’s time to go home!”

“Tell the Julius it’s time to go home,” said Mr. N.

“Seven pages tonight,” Cat ordered, as I picked up my books to leave. “And they’d better be good!”

Now, as I sat in Schatz’s boring Creative Writing class, the clock ticked nastily. In fact, it clicked backwards one click, then forwards two, every second. My musical ear could make out that the pitch difference between the backward clicks and the forward clicks was about a minor third. All I needed was a cuckoo to round out the harmony. The November sun slanted in through tall antique-looking windows to my left that I felt like smashing. A while back the PTA got on the school board’s back and all the windows were changed over to safety glass, but I knew I could do considerable damage with a fist and more guts than I knew I had. The room smelled like a library. There were, in fact, books available to us: various dictionaries, encyclopedias, thesauruses and the like. Now and then I liked to look up words that might explain what was intrinsically wrong with Cat. There had to be something. *Narcissism: inordinate fascination with oneself; excessive self-love; vanity.* Possibly. *Egomania: the irrational self-centered attitude or self-worship. A pathological preoccupation with the self and an exaggerated sense of one’s own importance.* That was more like it. I wrote these definitions on a piece of lined paper. I put the dictionaries back, very quietly so as not to disturb other students, and sat down. On the other side of the paper I wrote:

*This place was not always like this
There used to be pine trees by the lake And a log
cabin on the hill That overlooked the sunset.*

*And I had put my mark upon the cabin
So it was mine,
And everywhere ferns were growing
And day would end with the trees singing
Silently in the gentle wind
As soft as the lacy flowers
That grew on distant mountains But all of that is
gone away now It burned.
I burned it.*

Fuck damn. My fingers curled around my pencil. I'd been thinking about Kiwanee again. Camp Kiwanee, the summer camp I'd attended from the time I was eight until I was twelve. Camp Kiwanee, where indeed there had been cabins and girls playing guitars and singing and trees and sunsets and a beautiful lake surrounded by pines. Kiwanee! Kiwanee! Where we played tetherball and I actually won a few games. Where we sat back after dinner and sang songs, in harmony: *Michael, row your boat ashore, Hallelujah!* Where we shot arrows and it almost always didn't matter if we missed the bulls-eye. Where we campers of Cabin 12, Jo, the other Jo, who was called "Dude," Samantha, who was called "Sam," Beebi, whose real name was Wanda, but nobody ever remembered that, and I, twelve years old, played cards, strung together suede wallets, combed my bell-bottom jeans, and dreamed of days to come. Kiwanee! Kiwanee! *Sister, help to trim the sails, Hallelujah!* For Kiwanee was the place where I had met Maria, magical Maria, my camp counselor, who was eighteen years old, halfway a grown-up, and I loved her. Maria, who called us

“people,” not “girls” or “kids,” like the other counselors did. Maria, who, with flowers in her hair, handed me one and gently tucked it behind my ear. Maria, who kissed me, on my forehead, the day we had to part. Cat could never take these memories of Camp Kiwanee and Maria away from me—or could she? Cat knew I’d been to some kind of summer camp but she didn’t even know Maria’s name, or that I had a counselor I loved. No one knew. No one knew that I had been to Paradise, and would return someday... somehow...

I was secretly planning a bicycle trip to the Kiwanee campgrounds next summer. I knew I could find the place if I looked on a map. I knew the town, and I knew it would take about four hours each way...if only I could sneak away for a day! But Cat kept track of my every move. I wanted to recapture the magic of camp. Would it still be there? Did they still sing after dinner? Did the lake, surrounded by pines, still shimmer when the sun set? I wanted the wonderful memories to come back, all of them.

Perhaps, someday, I would make for myself a world that was as rich and as beautiful as the one I had known at Kiwanee, with Maria. I would be free to do whatever I chose! I could travel great highways, study for hours on end, walk in the woods down all the paths previously forbidden to me by *Cat*. But first, I had to break free from her. How? Life without her was barely even conceivable. Was it even possible?

I remembered the night Maria came to me when I was in bed, shivering, though it wasn’t cold. “Hey,” she said.

I jumped. “You scared me.” Her ghostlike silhouette, enhanced by her rain poncho, was indeed frightening.

“What’s wrong, Julie?” All of the other campers in our cabin were asleep, and it was already dark out, except for the lights over at the Administrative Building.

“I haven’t been sleeping,” I confessed.

“Is something bothering you?”

I turned over in my bed to face her. “The dark doesn’t really scare me, yet I am afraid.”

I hadn’t told her anything specific was wrong, she just knew. “I am here,” she said. “You have nothing to fear. Come, let’s go to that empty cabin over there, and talk.”

Ordinarily, I would jump at any opportunity to be alone with Maria, but now, I hesitated. This talk would be different. We would discuss things that might make me uncomfortable. I remembered feeling uncomfortable at school when teachers confronted me. But Maria wasn’t confronting me at all, and she was gentle, not like teachers.

I wore my rain poncho over my pajamas, and we headed to the empty cabin. It wasn’t really raining, just damp and dewy. “Sit on this bed,” said Maria, “and I’ll sit on this other one.” You could tell that this cabin hadn’t been used for a while, because there were cobwebs in it. We sat. “Now, tell me what’s wrong.” Maria’s curls glistened in the faint light. “Something’s been bothering you all day.”

The wind picked up outside, and sifted through the cabin screens. For a long time, I wasn’t sure what to say. Finally, I blurted, “I don’t know!” I fidgeted on the bed. I felt like biting my nails, but I’d grown out of that habit years ago.

“You always say, ‘I don’t know.’ From now on, you will not say that. Because you know, and you just don’t want to say.”

“But I really *don’t* know!”

“You do. See, Julie, I think I know you pretty well now. Camp is an intense experience. Campers and counselors are together twenty-four hours a day. You came here not knowing me, and I didn’t know you, but now we’ve been together ten days. And you know what?”

“Don’t you hate me?”

“You know what? You’re a beautiful person. I don’t just mean you look beautiful, but that you’re beautiful on the inside, too.”

“I’m ugly. Everyone at school calls me ‘shrimp.’ They tease me ‘cause of my glasses.”

“I’m going to show you how to stand up to them, Julie. They tease because they are insecure inside.”

“Really? I thought *I* was the one that was insecure.”

“You are beautiful, Julie. Look, I see just how your head works. You are fantastic. You are so different from the others. You are beautiful, inside and out.”

I looked at my feet. “No one ever said that to me before.”

“Well, I’m saying it to you now.”

I began to cry. Maria came and sat beside me. “No one’s ever been *nice* to me the way you’ve been.

No one’s ever *cared* even.”

“So then what is it that you are so afraid of?”

“I don’t *know*!”

“You don’t say that anymore, remember?” said Maria.

“I’m afraid of...of...”

“What? Say it.”

“Of...”

“Julie, you’re afraid of growing up.”

“Growing up?”

“Yes, growing up and becoming...becoming a *woman*.”

A woman. A woman was old. A woman was like my mother—no, worse—my grandmother! All wrinkly and dressed up with old lady mothball clothes, and blue hair—no, no, no! I wasn’t going to cook apple pie, or chicken, or go grocery shopping, or have a baby even! I would never get married, and I would never, never, never kiss a boy.

“I don’t *want* to grow up. I want to stay a twelveyear-old kid *forever*. I don’t want to be like *them*, like my parents, and all the other adults, who do all their supposedly important tasks, and have meaningless conversations, and don’t listen or pay much attention to us kids. *I will not grow up to be like them!* Yes, I’m afraid to grow up! I don’t want it!”

I was bawling now, realizing that all day long I’d been thinking this, knowing that someday I would be eighteen, like Maria, and after that, I would be twenty, and after that twenty-one, and then...but it was inconceivable. No, I would not let it happen. I would *not* grow up.

“Julie, growing up is inevitable. You have no choice. Growing up can be a beautiful experience. You learn along the way. I will be starting college next year. Imagine all the experiences I will have there! I am leaving home. You will leave home someday, too.”

“Now *that* I would like.”

“See, growing up isn’t all bad, is it?”

I pictured myself in my room, packing my bags for college. I imagined getting onto a bus, waving goodbye to my parents and brothers, my grandmother saying “Oy, oy!” I would step into the bus lavatory and wipe her wet lipstick off my cheek.

“No, not *all* of it will be bad,” I said.

“See?”

“Maria, I feel so...so close to you. Like I’ve never felt before with any other person. Not my parents. Nobody. I have *feelings* about you.” At once, I reached forward, and hugged her, and felt her soft cherubic cheeks and unruly hair against my neck, and my ear touched hers. As we came apart, she kissed me quietly on my cheek.

I said, “I love you, always.” And I wondered then what love was, and I wasn’t sure, but if there was such a thing as love between people, then here it was, between us, Maria and me, at that moment, in that cabin, at Camp Kiwanee.

And then camp ended.

Now, Schatz sat at his desk at the front of Creative Writing class and burped, and I wondered if it was from the booze he reputedly drank. Still in my seat, I folded the paper with the definitions of narcissism and egomania, and put it in my pocket, reminding myself to be careful to move the paper someplace else—Cat regularly checked my pockets.

“Psst. Hey, Julie. I’ve got something for you.” It was a student named Bruce, a friend of Cat’s, sitting diagonally from me. He quickly passed me a folded note.

“Thanks.”

I opened the note only when I was certain nobody was watching me.

I'm going out tonight. Write a story for me. A good one. Dan likes you, by the way. I want you to go out with him. He was crying and everything, talking about suicide if you don't. Tell him yes next time you see him. I'll call you tonight later to check up on you, and you'd better make sure the phone is free, or I'll be very upset.

Friends forever, I love you.

Cat

I was alone with my strife, but there was a bunch of losers and loners who felt overpowered by the world that banded together at a special place. I was a part of this group, Cat was not. She wasn't interested because she found the boys unattractive targets. They were too smart for her, besides. Some of us were nerds, others just weird. We all banded together around an unoccupied locker, #47, an ordinary, tan locker like all the others. We imagined it was lonely, almost as lonely as we were, where we would leave our original poetry for each other, and the world, to read. We were the “rejects,” the pimply kids who smelled, who walked funny, who memorized the first two hundred digits of pi just to see if we could do it, who played Dungeons and Dragons instead of football. A handful were on the math team; others played chess. One or two played chess against the school's computer and won. We were smart. We

were known to have “problems,” but didn’t all kids? This one never slept. That one and that one and that one had Asperger’s. And those in the corner over there were doing drugs—what did you expect? From these kids, I learned a few things about behaving within a group of people that I would not otherwise have learned, which played out as advantageous or detrimental, depending on how you looked at it. You have to consider that we may have had brains but sometimes intelligence is useless. We lacked maturity and what people called “social grace.” So Locker #47 was somewhat safe from Cat, which made the locker all the more attractive to me. I decided to head over there as soon as class was over. But first, I had some time to write. Cat’s letter could be put off till tonight, because she was going to be out somewhere. I decided to write a poem for Locker #47, and began by titling it with the word that described my emotional state:

DEPRESSED

*Slowly I watched the painting burn
The paint would sizzle and crack
And the canvas would burn with an ugly smell
It was a painting of breezes
The blues and greens were dark and singed
And everything around me is floating in smoke
Slowly; upward
And my head has been twisted away from me
And my body has been seething in smoke*

*Like the bits of canvas in the flames. For I have
used fire to burn up my life And now may the fire
devour me.*

I put my pencil down, realizing immediately that it wouldn't be safe to put this poem in Locker #47. Should it be taken seriously by anyone in the group they would all be shocked! I put the poem in my pocket. I felt scared and shaky all over. The shivers started in my knees, came up my back and shoulders and then into my hands, which by reflex curled into fists. *I'm going to go crazy someday.*

The poem I did find, later, when I arrived at Locker #47, was an untitled quatrain:

One time I was a bird in spacious sky
I flew the universe—a cosmic clown
At times dipped low at times I soared so high
And then I hit the ground—
alas! face-down!

Before I had the chance to see who had written the poem, I heard a voice behind me. "Hello, person." It was Dan. Or was it Maria?

"Hello, person."

I saw Dan then—but didn't I also see Maria? I saw in him Maria's cherubic face, her curly brown locks cascading down her shoulders, holding up two fingers, a "peace" sign. For she meant peace to me.

Dan always had a still manner about him, for he, too, meant peace, but he always looked so very tired. He drooped, his head tilted slightly, and then I saw Maria

again, her lips slightly parted. I saw her teeth, her tongue. Dan laughed.

He said, "Greater randomness." He was referring to Mr. Bailey's rule: all particles tend to go to a state of entropy.

"Randomness or lower energy," I replied.

"Crunch." Dan was always saying "crunch." I didn't know what it meant, but it had something to do with suicide.

"I found a poem," I said. "Anonymous."

"Let me see." He took it from me. "That's Celia's handwriting. Celia L." At Locker #47, everyone's poetry—mine, Dan's, everyone's—was always taken seriously, and we laughed at no one. That was an unspoken rule. Lord knows, we'd been laughed at enough times in our short lives. "Celia got caught," said

Dan. "Trading homework."

"Huh?" Maria, standing, ghostlike in the dark.

"Debby W wanted a higher grade so she made Celia write hers for her. They got caught. Debby got detention. Three weeks."

"And Celia?" It had been two months since Maria's last letter.

"One afternoon."

"Sheesh."

"Brian C asked me to 'lay easy' on a math exam so that others would be graded higher on the 'grading scale,' whatever that means."

*And she feeds you tea and oranges
That come all the way from China*

“It gets to the point that you become ashamed of your brains and you pretend you are dumb just to be liked.”

And just when you mean to tell her

Her face was right there, flickering in the campfire light.

“Crunch,” said Dan.

That you have no love to give her “Crunch,” I responded.

“I like you, person. You are so wise, a good listener, a person with understanding.”

She gets you on her wavelength

And she lets the river answer

That you’ve always been her lover

Maria’s face flickered again.

“Thank you, person,” I said. “What class do you have now?” I wondered if this was a stupid question. The light steadied now, a single flame. I wanted Maria to take me out of there. But I also wanted to soak up Dan’s aura, as if I were eating peppermint swirl ice cream.

“Russian,” he replied. “Upstairs.” He swung his heavy briefcase to and fro.

“Don’t study too hard.” Then I stopped myself. That was something *Cat* would say. I wanted to take back what I’d said.

“Strasfeetye, person.” Hello.

“Do sfeedanya, person.” Goodbye.

The vision of Maria faded as Dan disappeared down the hall. I remembered what I had written in my journal the night before: *He is magic. Everything about him. He is like a secret charm, like no one else.*

I continued to sort through papers in the locker. I thought about what Dan had said about me: wise, a good listener, a

person with understanding... It was easy to see how I got this way when you considered that I was Cat's slave. And I was going to stay Cat's slave if everything remained status quo.

II. The Seeker

1964/1970/1981

Colors

My mother's favorite color is yellow, the color of throw-up. I never did like yellow. I still don't. I don't like pink, either, but all girls are supposed to like pink the best.

I remember when my baby brother was crying in the back of the station wagon and he threw up. This was a long time ago, and it must have been in Connecticut at the time. My parents kept him in his creaky port-a-crib and all he did was cry. I put in a complaint about it. I complained to my father that both my brothers made way too much noise. It hurt my ears to have to hear their screaming on top of the roar of the car engine and the honk-honking of trucks and diesels and airplanes passing by. My father said someday my brothers' voices would change. I waited one hell of a long time for that to happen.

My brother cried in his crib in the way-back of the station wagon, and my mother and father sat up front driving down the highway, talking about Israel or President Lyndon Johnson or something. If you took a peek, you could see the windshield wipers swishswishing and the road maps colored like the veins on our grandmother's hands, and an orange-roofed Howard Johnson's that wasn't related to the president, all on the far-away highway, far away like our mother. My other brother was in the middle seat, sucking his thumb and holding his smelly stuffed tiger with his other hand. I thought I heard thunder. Then, the smell of oil. My baby brother cried because our mother was too far away.

I drew a picture of our mother on a blank page of my coloring book. It was a very nice coloring book with many pages. The picture was meant to deceive my brother into thinking it was really our mother right there beside us, but he knew it was only a drawing, even though I used some of my best crayons. I pushed the drawing closer and closer to him.

With an almighty scream, my brother threw up. He threw up all over the drawing, all over everything. His throwing up got my whole coloring book wet and disgusting, and it absorbed the vomit until it could absorb no more, and the vomit leaked out of his crib and onto the whole way-back and the seat and the floor, too. And I think of that vomit when I try to see my mother herself as a kid.

I carried secret toys, secret books, and secret friends, real and not real. About a month before my own bat mitzvah I got the special bleeding. To capture the mysterious flow, I used the same napkins my mother had, called Modess Sanitary Napkins, with a special elastic belt that had a steel claw. She showed me how. It didn't occur to me then, as it does now, that she had once been thirteen and had gone through the same demonstration with her own mother, with bloody rags.

Then she told me a secret, right there in her cold yellow bathroom with the pantry open wide and my stained underpants lying on the floor. She told me if you lose too much weight you won't get your periods. She told me she didn't get her periods for two years when she was a teen. And that was all she said.

I took this information and cataloged it deep in my memory along with the reams of other facts and ideas being fed to me that year when I was bat mitzvahed. I

wanted to become a lawyer at the time, so I watched Perry Mason on TV every day after school. I had a lot to remember.

One day, I saw a woman across the aisle wearing black boots and a pink jacket. Her daughter was wearing the exact same thing. They were heavily made-up. They joked and laughed together like best friends. Then I got off the bus. Years had passed. I bought a brand new big navy umbrella, used it as a parasol, and wandered around Central Square. Men and women walked arm in arm, and women with women and men with men. Money was everywhere. Red food of all sorts lay in open troughs on the sidewalks. You could see steam rising from lobsters that still twitched. Street musicians played accordion and flute. Listeners lay naked and obese in the swill of the sun. I tried to avoid the bums and winos. But I was feeling rather sick myself. I crossed myself forty times and prayed I wouldn't puke.

Then I saw blood. Blood dripped on pristine concrete. I followed it. I believed it was an abscess that dribbled terrifyingly onto the street. The street widened, and became a great river road leading somewhere in a vacant promise. It was the Absence of Love.

I followed the strewn, missing crayons that had rolled and melted and gleamed and shivered like horned sheep in the middle of the highway. I darted among the cars and trucks that vroomed and roared, calling out to me in one single voice I could hear but never believe. I chased every color on the page. I was batted around by every vehicle that swished past me. With every poom! poom! came a fresh splatter toward the Heavens and the Earth. I searched, I begged for my mother to be waiting for me, calling to me with outstretched arms at the guardrail, but

she was never there, and what I saw instead, when all was said and done, were scant, dirty, yellow flowers washed aside, flattened in the gutter.

1970-1971

Hunger:

Arrows

I released the bow; the arrow whooshed past my left hand, made an arc in the air, and landed three feet shy of the target, twenty yards away. The other twelve-year-old girls seemed to be faring better than I. The counselor blew her whistle and we collected our arrows.

“One last shoot!” she shouted.

I was relieved that this would be over. The girls’ giggles and whispers behind my back were getting to me. I thought I heard the word “lesbian.” I didn’t know what it meant.

I loaded my bow, pulled it back, and shot. The arrow landed on the white ring, the outer ring.

“Hey, she actually got it on the target!” shouted one of the girls.

“Yeah, pure luck,” said another.

“She’ll go running to Maria, the counselor, and tell her,” said a third.

I shot the second arrow. It landed on the red ring. The girls, awed, backed off. I flashed a glance at them, then returned to my bow.

All was silent. I *had* to get this right. An arrow in the grass meant failure and unending teasing. I stroked my third arrow. Please, be a lucky one. Please... This one’s for Maria...

I loaded the bow, pulled back, and held it there for a moment, my fingers by my ear. Wasn’t the bow singing to me? *River Jordan is chilly and wide,*

Hallelujah!

I shot the arrow. It arced ever so gracefully, following a perfect path, to the bulls-eye.

Maria found me afterward, saying, “Julie, that was magnificent. I saw you. I saw you hit the bulls-eye.” She took my hand in hers and we walked together toward the camp dining hall. “You’re such a special camper.”

“You—it’s you that makes me special.” I squeezed her hand. “You’re a special counselor.” I tried to remember the name the girls had called me, something that began with “L,” but I could not recall the word. I wanted to ask Maria what it meant.

I’d never truly felt special before, not in the way that Maria made me feel special. Sure, my grandmother used that word all the time around me—“special”—but she was so old and fussy that I dismissed those remarks as meaningless and overprotective, more an insult than said out of love. That day, Maria wore flowers around her neck and in her hair, and I wanted to wear flowers, too, just like her. “I love you,” I told her, as we continued to walk hand in hand, I not once feeling guilty about loving someone outside my family more than I loved my own parents, because this, I decided, was what I’d been craving all along. This was what love and friendship were all about. And I wanted to make the summer last forever.

My parents came to pick me up at camp at the end of the summer, bringing with them a friend of mine named Ruthie. Ruthie had learned to play tennis over the summer, with an opponent and a net, and had been tutored at the art museum in Boston, on the urging of her parents. Ruthie was a year younger than me, a very pretty girl who wore her hair in a bandanna sometimes.

“Ruthie,” I asked her, “who are you closest to?” I felt funny asking the question. It didn’t seem like the kind of question I should ask of someone I hadn’t seen all summer.

Ruthie didn’t seem to mind, though, and she didn’t hesitate to give her answer. “My father,” she said. “I’m closest to my father.”

How could it be? How could someone be close to a *parent*? I didn’t think closeness with parents was possible or likely, given that my own parents were distant, and on a “different wavelength” from us kids. Their conversations always seemed so shallow and meaningless that closeness was out of the question. “Your *father*?” I asked, incredulous.

“Of course,” said Ruthie. “Aren’t you...well, who are you closest to? Your mom?”

“I’m closest to Miss Maria, my counselor,” I said quietly.

“Your *counselor*?”

“Yes. Miss Maria is cool. She’s against the Vietnam War and everything. She knows the words to all these cool songs like ‘Big Yellow Taxi’ and ‘Suzanne.’ And we all made gimp lanyards and suede moccasins and did archery, and had tetherball tournaments with Miss Maria, too.”

Ruthie said, “Did you know that if you cross your eyes too much, they’ll get stuck that way?”

Somehow, at that moment, I knew that the summer had ended, and that nothing would ever, ever be the same.

When I returned to school, I was in the eighth grade, and I was beginning to grow. But now I saw school in a different light. For I had tasted love. Maria’s letters came

infrequently, but I cherished each one. Whereas school had been a nightmare before I met Maria, eighth grade was the best year yet. I developed a certain rapport with the teachers, a certain familiarity. I frequently stayed after school to have friendly chats with them; whether they found me a nuisance or not was of no consequence to me. In my innocence I only saw my conversations with them an opportunity to learn more about the world. I came very close to knowing them on a first name basis. Surely this was more than taboo, it was sacrilege in those days! Perhaps because I had known Maria, I had developed a certain confidence dealing with adults younger than my parents. The teachers I knew were fresh out of college and they themselves were idealistic and a touch naive. There was Mr. Ellwood, the social studies teacher, who taught me about individualism; Miss Satchell, another social studies teacher, whom I knew only a little; and the math teacher, her name escapes me now. She allowed me to get somewhat ahead of the class. I explained this to Maria in a letter. I received her reply two weeks later. "Having crushes on teachers is a prelude to having crushes on boys," she wrote. I admired Maria's uneven, southpaw writing; it made me wish that I, too, was lefthanded. But I asked myself, "What about having crushes on girls? What then?" It didn't occur to me in the least that there was anything special or unusual about my asking this question, and I felt dismayed that Maria didn't consider it, at least not in her letter to me.

On the first day of high school, Mrs. Simpson took attendance, and when she said my name, added, "Julie Greene! I've heard about you. You are always late for class because you stay after the class before talking to the teachers!"

Peels of giggles emitted from all sides of the room, then the class erupted in full laughter. “Julie Greene, Julie Greene!” kids shouted. “She likes the teachers!” Doug Gorn’s bubblegum fell straight out of his mouth because he was laughing so hard. And that was the kind of teasing I was up against in high school. I knew I was the idealist that had tasted love. I had known love and thought I could find it again in high school.

How did it all begin? She was my friend. Sure, we were close, but I found myself having even stronger feelings toward her. I loved the way she flicked her hair off to the side, her decisive way of walking, and her expressive eyes that told me in an instant whether she was happy or sad or angry or hurt. I had known her only six weeks or so when, one evening as we were walking down Marrett Road, I turned to her and told her I loved her.

“That’s okay,” she said. “That’s perfectly fine.”

Did I expect a duplication of my loving experience with Maria? It was not to be so. And I found this out very, very quickly.

1983

**A Forgotten Line:
Silent Scream**

Seven in the morning and I hadn't slept much. There was a change of shift at the hospital. A different bunch of nurses were on duty trying to get some big old guy across the hall out of his bed and onto a commode. Out the window, a raging snowstorm blinded my view of the outdoors, not that I cared. Storms like these were not unusual for Vermont in January. I saw my hospital roommate, awake for the first time, coming out of the bathroom. She wore a robe and slippers, and as she passed, I hid my head under my pillow to avoid her. I stepped off the bed. My turn in the bathroom. Covering my face was a horrible hospital film that I couldn't scrub off, though I had tried many times to rid myself of this filth with the soap provided. I would try again.

A knock on the door. I jumped. "Julie? Julie?" Struggling to answer. "Julie?" Speech is forbidden. "Julie, are you okay?" The door opened. A flood of light blinded me, washed over me and shot at me like dozens of bullets. "Julie? Julie? It's only me. I'm checking on you." *Check check check check check*. "What are you doing? It's okay. It's just the nurse. It's okay." *No it's not it's not I can't breathe I can't* "It's okay. I'm just doing checks. Steady now. Maybe I should check your vitals, eh? Hey, Margaret, I need some help in here. Julie?" *oh my god it's not oh my god help me I'm falling*

Another nurse's breathless voice. "What's going on?"

Sparkles and streams and bits slammed into me this way and that. My head exploded into a thousand stars. Pumping oxygen on overdrive. Blood squeezed into the

heart, the intricacy of veins shattered, like stained glass. Organs imploded. Churchgoers barking out orders in stench-filled Latin, bursting out of the doors...

"She seems to have collapsed."

The whole world is watching the whole world is watching the whole world is watching

"Panic attack, maybe."

"Something like that. Get Margaret."

"Right-o. She's coming."

"Julie, here's my hand." *dying, now* "Take my hand." I couldn't take her hand a thousand times, a thousand times I couldn't take it. "Hold onto my hand. Let's get her on the bed. C'mon, Julie. Stand up. You can do it. Out of the bathroom. C'mon, stand up."

"What's going on?" Another nurse. "C'mon, Julie, stand up. Stop screaming! Julie! Julie! Laura, where's Margaret?"

It was running out of me now, running like an oil spill, running onto the floor, a gushing flood of nonverbal "help me" emoting from my mouth cavity. "Ai! Ai!

Ai!"

"Julie, we can't help you if you scream like that."

"We'll help you walk. Here's your bed. Open your eyes. C'mon. Laura, help me lift her onto the bed. Margaret—Julie, stop screaming—we can't just let her go on like this. Look at her now. She's genuinely scared. She's terrified! Margaret, what do you think? Call Scully?"

"Scully was supposed to have his ass up here last night."

"He says he won't talk to her until she talks to us."

"He's a piece of work."

1974

Hunger:

A Search for Love

Cat and I sat scrunched in the back of the family van, where I failed her yet another time. We were coming home from hiking Mount Carrigain, a moderate climb that took all day, and we—Cat, who was my friend, and my family: Mom, Dad, and the boys—had completed it just before dark. The boys were asleep in the middle seat, their fingers in their mouths. Mom, too, nodded off occasionally, way up front, which was her tendency; that's why Dad always drove.

We'd found walking sticks earlier that day along the trail that were really nice, with knots in just the right places. Cat weighed them in her hands, examining them, then handed me a stick and said, "You can have this one. *I* get the better one." She swatted a mosquito, then flicked back her hair.

The wind rustled the tree leaves. I thought I heard a chickadee, calling its alarm song, "Chickadee-dee-dee-dee!" but maybe I was imagining it.

We were sixteen, by ourselves in the back of the van, and old enough to know better than to do what we were doing. Cat insisted that I hold her stick while she carved, and I did so. We worked by the light of a flashlight that we had propped between a couple of knapsacks, hers and mine.

"Hold it *stiller!*" she said. "I want to carve arrows into this stick!"

I held the stick tight. I was sweating. I felt dirty, contaminated. "The van is bumping," I said, exasperated. "Don't you think—"

“Shut up and do as you’re told!” she said.

I held the stick tight, but the tighter I held, it seemed, the more I shook. I knew my father couldn’t see us in his rearview mirror, but Mom had eyes in the back of her head, as she put it, and I knew she was awake, because I heard her talking to my father.

“Norm who?”

“Norm Kapenski,” my father replied. “Died in his sleep.”

“He didn’t age well,” my mother said sadly. “Do you want to stop for coffee? A shame.”

“A shame,” my father echoed. “No, I can do without.”

“Cat will be upset if we stop,” said my mother.

“Then we’d better not,” said my father.

The van bumped. Cat said, “Stupid. You wiggled. Don’t *do* that. I want you to hold it perfectly still. I want you to hold your breath. Now. Hold your breath. That’s right. You love me, don’t you?”

I nodded, holding my breath. “You’re not breathing, are you?” I shook my head.

“Hold the stick down further!” she ordered, and I did so. Her Swiss Army knife glistened in the light of the flashlight. She worked furiously. She finished the tip of the arrow, and began to work on the shaft. Bits of wood fell onto the van floor, which we had covered with a blanket. The van kept its course steady. The arrow was just about finished. “Okay, you can breathe,” Cat said. “I want your opinion. And it better be good.”

“Oh, Cat,” I began, “the arrow is simply marvelous!”

“What else?”

“It is beautiful. It shows your artistic talent.”

“What does the arrow symbolize?” she demanded.

“The arrow symbolizes desire and destitution,” I responded.

“Wrong!” said Cat. “How can you be so stupid? This arrow symbolizes our friendship, that we’re friends forever.”

“Friends forever,” I echoed.

The van turned a corner. Cat’s knife went straight into her palm.

She didn’t cry out. She didn’t seem surprised. I couldn’t tell how deep the cut was, given that the light was so dim. It didn’t bleed much, not at first. “Hold your hand up,” I said. “I’ll tell Mom. They have a First Aid kit.”

She pouted. “Don’t be dumb. I’ll be fine. Don’t tell them. I don’t want a stupid Band-Aid. I don’t want your parents to know what we were doing, after all.” Blood began to drip from the cut, toward Cat’s sleeve. She began to cry.

“Direct pressure,” I said.

She placed two fingers on the cut, and held them there. Her arm shook. She said, “This cut is secret. This cut is special. This cut has meaning. This cut symbolizes your failure. How you’ve failed me as a friend. How your whole family has failed me. See how I hurt. I am very hurt. You’d better make it better. You owe me at least that. You are my *friend*.”

I had a vision, just then, of our family dog, Joffa. I pictured Joffa gazing at me with her big doggy eyes, wanting something from me, wanting it very badly, and at the same time not knowing exactly what she wanted. I imagined giving her a little pat, she bringing her head up to rub against my hand, and sitting there, pushing up against my hand, wanting more, and more and more.

I took Cat's hand and held it. I took off my bandanna. I placed it over her cut, and applied pressure. Cat's hand seemed so soft, so fragile and delicate, not the hand that, only moments before, had firmly held a wooden walking stick.

"I am your friend," I said, and, getting up on my knees beside her, I held her hand to my cheek, and kissed it, again and again. "My friend," I said, knowing that if I wept, I must suppress my tears.

1981

At the Crossroads:

Irene

I backed away from the dining room doorway. The smoke was getting to me, and my eyes were beginning to smart. Nobody at college had smoked like this, and here I was, back in Boston, at Crossroads Day Treatment, where everything was so amazingly different from anything I'd ever known previously. A woman smiled at me through the haze. I gathered, from the conversation that had picked up, that her name was Irene. Besides Leslie's blonde hair, which was a platinum dye, Irene was the only blonde at Crossroads. Her natural-looking, beautiful curls framed her face and cascaded down her shoulders, gracing her breasts. "Come sit with me," she said.

"C-c-c-can I sit with you?" It was Nicky. "C-c-can I?" His hands wavered up and down as he spoke, and he swayed on his feet, as if he would fall. His shirt was covered with coffee spills that had dribbled down his beard.

Irene reached into her bag and pulled out a small make-up purse, which she opened and sorted through. "No, Honey, I'm saving that seat for Julie. The new girl."

"Sh-sh-she's new, Irene."

"There's a seat over at that table. It's by the window. It's a good seat. How about sitting there?"

"Okay."

Finding a mirror, Irene sucked in her face and applied blush, then said to me, "Sit down. Welcome to my table. Get yourself some coffee. Leslie made it this morning so

it's not too bad. I bring my own Equal, not Sweet-'n'-Low. You can have some. Sit down. Get some coffee and have a seat."

In my mind, I tried to sort through all the reasons why I might have been so nervous—terrified, in fact—of this woman, Irene. She seemed to be agreeable, polite, and friendly, so what was my fear all about? I was more afraid to have a conversation and certainly to be friends with this woman than I was to get chummy with Tim D or even Richie or Nicky or Kevin. I could put aside hygiene issues. I could tolerate Bible-obsession, loud talking, bad manners, mumbling to oneself, drooling, spitting, not making sense, all of these things I could overlook, but not Irene! Why?

"In a while," I responded. "Thanks."

"You shy?" she asked. "C'mon, let's talk."

"Yeah. Sorry."

Irene was a threat because she was more like me than the other people at Crossroads. If I were to get to know her, I might identify with her, sympathize with her, understand her, be loyal to her. She might identify with me as well. I might grow to trust her, and she, in turn, grow to trust me. We might confide in each other, share our secrets. What if...what if I trusted her so much that...no, it would never happen. Irene would *never* become my roommate! Why was I even thinking *that!* I would never trust *her*...

"Julie, you'll get used to it here. Don't be afraid of *me*. Sit down."

I sat. "Th-thanks," I said.

"It took me a while, too. Don't worry, you'll feel at home here in no time."

And indeed, I thought to myself that I felt homeless, not in the sense of not living anywhere— surely, my parents had provided me with a place to sleep at night— but a feeling of not belonging anywhere. I no longer belonged at Bennington College. My hometown didn't feel like much of a hometown in Lexington, Massachusetts, anymore. I didn't even feel like I belonged in my own family. Would Crossroads be the place for me? If so, then in some strange perverted way, I wanted to be like these very sick people. I wanted to belong, and Irene, for some nonsensical reason, seemed way, way too close already.

1974

Locker #47:

The Outer Limits

I opened Locker #47, where all our poems were kept, poems written by the nerds and math team kids of Lexington High. A new poem was in the locker, Andrew D's over-inked scrawl. The poem even smelled like him, sort of, like his weird aftershave. Andrew was one of the few boys around who already had a thick, dark beard that needed daily shaving. He was a sweet kid but not one I thought would ever make it in life, because he was so angry. Get him started on politics and he wouldn't shut up. When he got going, I tuned out and usually left the room. I had enough on my mind, *personal* problems. I didn't need another rant on the Six Day War and Israeli politics on top of it.

I opened the poem.

I love you like snow loves winter I cling to you like grapes to the vine I knock on your door—can I enter?

Dearest Betsy—Please be mine!

This was not a good thing, no, not at all. Every one of us knew of Andrew's adoration for Betsy C, but he wouldn't quit, not even after Betsy's friends, who were nothing like us, quietly and unbeknownst to Betsy gave Andrew a good talking-to. Even Cat wanted to shake some sense into him. No way would Betsy C (who was headed for Wellesley College next year, we all knew that), even *look* in Andrew's direction. She was a class ahead of him, in my class, and she sure was looking ahead, not back. Rumor had it that she had plans to

spend time on a Kibbutz sometime next summer. She was tall, close to six feet, pretty, wise, intelligent, well put-together, innocent, delicate, and *she wasn't one of us*.

But because I was the one to find the poem, it was up to me to find Betsy C and deliver it to her. It was another one of those unspoken rules: if a poem in the locker was directed at another person, whoever found the poem first had to deliver it to its recipient. So I had to see to it that Andrew's love poem made its way to its destination.

It was getting late into C period already, and I felt sick over this task, because I knew Andrew's efforts would be fruitless. I mean, if I'd been in Betsy's shiny expensive shoes I wouldn't have stooped so low as to have anything to do with Andrew. I cared about Andrew because he was *one of us*, but inside, I hoped to God that Betsy, perfect as she was, would stay away, lest she become contaminated.

I carried the note hidden in my trumpet case for a long time without looking for Betsy. I went to lunch and ate an ice cream sandwich. Nothing else, just an ice cream sandwich, slurping the edges of the ice cream first, then I ate the cookie, wondering if a person could kill herself by eating nothing but ice cream sandwiches. I wandered outside, where it was nippy for November, wearing just a t-shirt, then I sat outside the band room, which had a back door leading to the outside. I buried myself in crisp, brown oak leaves and tried to stab myself with my mechanical pencil. I could hypnotize myself just watching the lead move up and down the shaft.

I fiddled with my pinky ring nervously, the "friendship ring" from Cat. I had worn it continuously since she had given it to me, and sometimes it itched, but

I didn't dare take it off. It seemed that somehow, Cat might find out if it accidentally slipped off, as if the ring had a radio transmitter attached to it. I remembered the day she had given it to me. We had secluded ourselves in the upstairs bathroom of my house, our makeshift darkroom, where we were developing black and white photography. The lights were off except for one dim red light that was the kind that wouldn't ruin our prints. We were only freshmen then.

"It's hot in here," I said to Cat.

"Well, if your stupid father hadn't turned up the heat ___"

"Let's take our shirts off."

"Okay. Your parents better not come in."

I slipped my shirt over my head. "They won't. We're developing prints, remember? I wish I could see something."

"You can't see, anyway. You're so *blind*."

I thought I should do something while we were standing there with our shirts off, or say something, at that moment, some act of affection, but I didn't know what to say, so I blurted out, "Don't you wish one of us was a boy?"

"Why would I wish that?" Cat sneered. I wished I hadn't asked the question. "Come on, we're done with the prints." She turned on the lights.

Exposed, I panicked as we both scrambled to put our shirts back on. The moment was ruined, and I had ruined it. In her hand Cat held two silver rings. They probably weren't real silver, but they looked shiny and official and brand new. "These are friendship rings," she said. "They bind us together. You will wear yours to remind yourself that you belong to me and to no one else. Understand?"

“Yes, Master,” I said.

“You will have no other friends.”

“Yes, Master.”

“You will obey me at all costs, always, forever.”

“Yes, Master.”

I heard my mother calling from downstairs. “Julie, Cat, it’s *suppertime!* Is Cat staying for supper?”

“Yes, I am, Mom,” Cat called out. Then she said to me, “Your parents are great.” We put away some of the equipment, and left the rest for later. “Wear the ring,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “They’re great all right.”

And now, at the band room, I found Betsy on her way to her flute lesson. I dusted the leaves off my jeans. I wondered how Betsy could be so tall and I so short. She got good grades and everyone said she had *promise*. No one ever said that about me. I approached her, saying, “Andrew D wanted me to give this to you.”

Something happened then that surprised me. I had thought that Betsy would toss the poem into the trash barrel without reading it, but instead she turned pale white—I mean, even paler and whiter than she already was, even her freckles turned white—and said to me, “Yes, thank you. How are you today?” “Okay,” I said sheepishly.

“You always seem so withdrawn into yourself. We’re all very concerned about you, you know.” The heavy band room door creaked shut, and Betsy disappeared into her lesson. I slumped onto the back wall near the bike rack. Yeah, my parents were great all right.

The sun beat down on me the whole time I was sitting there by the band room, thinking about all that stuff, and sort of crying, but I couldn’t *really* cry, just got a little

wet-eyed. I sat there, anyway, until I spied Andrew D himself trudging across the quadrangle lawn with his tacky briefcase. The leaves had blown away so I couldn't hide in them, but I was wearing that orange knit hat I always wore no matter what the weather, and I slid that hat over my face halfway so perhaps Andrew wouldn't know it was me that was crouched there, but he saw me.

"Julie, where's Cat?" His voice was especially nasal, like he'd blown his nose too much. I knew he used a handkerchief, an especially nerdy habit. I also knew he honked.

"Beats me."

"You always know where Cat is."

"I don't know where she is. She had French."

"Well, you're supposed to know."

"Look, Andrew, I just gave Betsy your poem. Your poem from the *locker*. This is *serious*. She's in there having her flute lesson."

"Did she read the poem?"

"Read it? Read it? She's playing the flute, silly. She's reading music."

"Did she read it?"

"I don't know, Andrew. Bug off."

Andrew sat on the other side of the step and opened his Samsonite briefcase. I rarely saw the inside of anyone's briefcase; it was like their private castle, so I took a good look. Everything in there was in perfect order. He took out his heavy calculus textbook, so thick his hand barely fit around it, and closed the briefcase. Opening the book to a bookmarked page, he stated, "Problem 5d on page 297. If I don't get that proof by the time *The Outer Limits* comes on, I'm going to kill myself."

1982

Breakfast

I look at my watch. 7:35. Bubbles screamed in my head all night but I couldn't catch them. They floated, slipped from my fingertips, like drops of mercury. Here in the morning, the kitchen teases me with its aqua and green polka-dots on the wallpaper, playing all day in the sun. Like Irene, they beam in, reflecting off the windowpane. It would be so easy to smash the yellow.

Mother has kept her appointment. She flutters about the kitchen. She apologizes for being late. She sets the table for four. Forks and knives and spoons. Stretched yellow balloons surround her, that banter, and bargain, and bite. She boils hot water, talking, but I cannot hear. Makes orange slices. Pours a bowl of cereal for her husband. So this is breakfast, at 7:35.

I remember buying Fruit Loops in five boxes. So many colors. Even Irene cannot save me. Eat, eat.

She pours him skimmed milk in a tiny pitcher for his cereal.

I drink half my pineapple juice and dream of California.

I take the vitamin C that she has dutifully placed in my spoon. It is poison, but it is too late, I have swallowed it already. I cough up aqua bubbles that I cannot catch. They get sucked up into the fan that is embedded in the wall. Julie, cover your mouth. My stomach hurts.

Mother won't sit down. She is a skinny Weeble and I hate the yellow halo she wears that never comes off. She says, "I must, must stand, for exercise!"

My cereal smells like the school bus that Irene and I slept on last weekend, just for fun.

Mother says, “You are trying to provoke me, Julie. Why don’t you go back to college?” She has been talking about provocation for weeks. I have been Evil for years. Call the attorneys. Alert the media. Get NPR in here.

At last, she sits. Unopened mail and unread newspapers hover over the table, and I cannot see her too well because of the mountains everywhere. Mother opens a letter around the corner, from a political candidate or a fundraising organization.

Valentines sit on the Lazy Susan. Mother to Dad: “You still have what it takes to light my fire.” Dad to Mother: “To my better half.” Parents to son: “There’s a word for sons like you...TERRIFIC.”

I can see “terrific” painted on the wallpaper polka dots, just above Mother’s head, shimmering like the asphalt on a hot Nevada highway.

Mother: “Julie, I bought myself a reflective vest for bicycle riding! It is much better than the other one I’ve got because it has Velcro rather than buttons! Velcro! Velcro!”

“It’s supposed to snow today,” she says. “Oh, Alan!”

“Ladies, good morning.” He sits. With a letter opener, he opens several letters from the governor about the school busing program in Boston. A flyer from Public Radio. “I can’t seem to locate that program I heard on the schedule,” he says.

I can’t locate the program either, because I am creamed in a mixing bowl with sugar, flour, and butter, and then I eat my way out.

Dad wolfs down three slices of orange, a bowl of cereal and half a yellow banana. Mother has consumed a glass of warm water, a glass of skimmed milk, a soft boiled egg, three slices of orange, and the other half of Dad's banana. She makes instant coffee for both of them. Regular for herself. Decaf for him.

"Alan," says Mother, "I'm too busy with the League of Women Voters to make all the meals this weekend. The alternative is to go out to eat. I could throw something together, I suppose, but it won't be very elaborate. Which would you prefer?"

Dad leaves for work. So that was breakfast.

"Julie," Mother says, "He's busy with his computer programs."

Irene spells herself backwards to me: E-N-E...

Mother has risen, like the moon. She has already cleared his breakfast as well as her own, and made her lunch for the day.

Irene, too, has risen.

"I have already cleared his breakfast as well as my own, and made my lunch for the day," she says. She leaves the room, but her words, and the letter "O," remain. They roll and bounce, like polka-dot bubbles in the center of the kitchen. I try to pop one, but it gets away from me. It would be so easy to smash the yellow.

1981

**At the Crossroads:
Community Meeting**

“Does anyone have any more community issues?” Community meeting at Crossroads Day Treatment had begun, and Diana had introduced me, telling the “community,” some thirty-five clients and therapists, that I would be in her “Administrative Group.” In other words, she would be my therapist while I was in the program. At the time, I thought I would be at the program only a few weeks, while I lived in Boston with my parents, then the plan was to move back to Vermont next semester and continue with college, but Diana didn’t say anything about that to the community.

“No community issues before I end the group?” Rick asked. Rick was the therapist who ran Group Therapy, and he was running this group as well. I immediately liked him. He had more than a twinkle in his eye, his whole face twinkled.

We were seated, all of us, in a large circle. The church had rented their basement to the program to use for larger groups and groups that required lots of space. Cabinets on the far wall contained art supplies, I assumed. After I’d stared at it for a time, I noticed the basketball net up in the front of the room was twitching in the barely perceptible breeze.

“Yes, I have one,” said an older, hoarse-voiced woman. Her deformed hands were gripped around her belly. “No one throws away their coffee cups. I have to pick up after everyone. The kitchen is a mess. The dining room is a mess. Why do I always have to be the one—”

“Shaddup, Leslie,” said Tim D. “Every morning, the same thing, every morning.”

There was general hubbub in the room. Someone began to whistle. Rick held up his hands to form the letter “T.” Time out.

Rick said very quietly. “You both have a point.”

Leslie said, “He interrupted me. *He* interrupted me!” She flailed her arms in the air and shouted, “You! You! You!”

“Hear me out,” said Rick. “The coffee cups need to be thrown out.”

“Here here!”

“But Leslie, you don’t have to take on the responsibility of cleaning up after everyone.”

“Here here!”

“Tim, you need to be polite and tolerant. If there is anything further to discuss about this, we will bring it up in the Administrative Group. And Group Therapy.”

The more I heard about Group Therapy, the more curious I became: Why was this group fear so much more than the others? What drew the handful of Crossroads clients to attend this group, twice a week, every week, as dutifully as if they were attending Mass and confession? It was not a far stretch of the imagination to see rosary beads in each client’s hands, counting, chanting away the minutes until Group Therapy began.

1983

**A Forgotten Line:
Another Roommate**

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. Go back to sleep.”

I hadn’t realized I’d been asleep. With all the noise at Putnam Memorial Hospital, it was hard to sleep at all. My hospital roommate, looking refreshed and much different than she had earlier, peered at me as I lay on the bed. Rugged-looking, late thirties. “I’m Vivian. I’m here for depression. Is that what you’re here for, too? You can’t even talk. You look so scared. Listen, if you need anything, shampoo, conditioner, whatever.” She sat down on her bed and pushed the dividing curtain open. “Whatever, just, you know, ask. Christ, they treat you like shit in here and then expect you to talk. Who’s your doctor? Oh, never mind. Mine’s Scully. Sent me up north the first time, you know, *State*. I managed, but my kids—you didn’t eat breakfast, did you? They have fruit in the other room. I’ll grab you a piece. Just nod your head. No? Okay. Just thought I’d ask. They allow us real coffee here, and we can smoke in the dining room area. Hullo?”

“It’s Hilda, the charge nurse.” The nurse stepped into the room. “How are you two getting along?” I quickly sat up.

“Fine,” Vivian retorted.

“Just checking.” Hilda held several notebooks in her arms. Unlike the other nurses, she wasn’t wearing a uniform, just a lab coat over her clothes. “Julie, I expect you to get dressed and look presentable. This isn’t a pajama party.”

It suddenly occurred to me that today was my twenty-fifth birthday. I giggled.

“Cat got your tongue, Ms. Greene? What’s so funny?” Her stare was like the hot flashlight beam the nurses had flashed at me at intervals during the shivery night. She turned and left.

“I don’t like her,” whispered Vivian. “I don’t trust her.”

1981

**At the Crossroads:
A Different Kevin**

Now that I was attending Crossroads Day Treatment, I thought little about the mess I'd left behind at Bennington College. Leaving college hadn't been as clean and quiet as I would have liked. I had to excuse myself from performances to which I'd already been committed. Music majors were required to put on their own concerts during their senior year, and certain students' senior concert plans nearly fell through on my account. Nor would my own senior concert happen, at least not right away, so all those who had painstakingly prepared for it had done so for naught. The community orchestra was suddenly without a first chair trumpet player. Angry faculty and students would have spat in my face had I been there. Thankfully, there were those who clean up messes, peacemakers on the faculty who were resourceful enough to know what to do. The college hired trumpet players to take my place when they couldn't find anyone else. Capable local high school students filled in when they could. But what the peacemakers couldn't achieve was to erase the stigma of mental illness, regarding me, that floated among faculty and students following my departure. She's *nuts*, she must be *pregnant*, gone off to the *loony bin*, some *man* must be to blame for this, a *head case*, she was just *weird* anyway, well, another one *bites the dust*, too bad it had to be someone with brains.

Administrative Group at Crossroads was like a repeat of the Community Meeting, only in miniature. Diana asked each of us, her specific clients, how things were

going for us in general, whether we'd showered, and if we were having symptoms. I'd showered, but I didn't know what "symptoms" were, really, because I wasn't aware that I had any sort of illness. I had *problems*. That was all that I knew, or would admit to at the time. A young man named Kevin—a different Kevin—reported that he'd been hearing voices. "All the time, I hear them, Diana," he said. He had deep, sad eyes circled with dark fleshy patches. I felt sorry for him.

"Kevin, we've tried every medication," Diana replied.

"I didn't get my shot this week." He pronounced it "shawt."

"You will get it today. Your Haldol. Emily will give you your shot." Diana spoke slowly to Kevin, and overenunciated her words.

"The nurse?" Kevin rocked to and fro in his chair, wide-eyed.

"Yes. Emily. You have known Emily a long time now, Kevin."

"Emily's a very nice lady."

"Yes, she is, Kevin."

Kevin's leg bounced up and down. I sensed that this movement was involuntary. Perhaps he was nervous. "The Haldol doesn't work. I still hear the voices."

"You said yesterday that the Haldol was helping."

"No, it doesn't," Kevin insisted. "I still hear them. Even when I sleep, I hear them."

"Kevin, you are probably just dreaming."

"No." Kevin was emphatic. "I hear them in my sleep! They wake me up! Why do I have to keep on getting those shots if they don't help?"

"Haldol keeps you calm, Kevin."

"But nothing helps the voices!"

“Maybe, then, if medication isn’t the answer, the voices are only your imagination.”

What was this “Haldol shot”? It seemed as though Kevin didn’t want it, that it was forced upon him. What were these “voices” that Kevin heard? Were they indeed *only* his imagination? Or did they come from some Other, like my Martians? What was the difference? Did it matter? How much longer could I continue to keep my problems stuffed inside me, before I burst apart? How much more could one person take?

1974

Locker #47:

Survival and the Family Dog

We sat on the steps outside the band room at Lexington High School. I could still hear Betsy's flute among the chirping of birds and the rustling of leaves in the school yard. Andrew scratched his head, adjusted his glasses, and went to work on his calculus equation. His incessant whistling especially bothered me. A girl walked by about fifty feet from us, carrying a guitar. She was almost silhouetted with the sun low in the sky, it being November. Andrew glanced up and said, "She's got a problem relating to other people, that girl."

I slammed my book onto the concrete step. If I had dared, I would have said, "Andrew, do you have to get like that? I mean, does everyone else have to have a problem? Does everyone except you have to have this big *personal* problem? This big *emotional* crisis?" But I didn't say that. I just stared at the bushes, feeling stupid.

"Huh?" said Andrew.

"Nothing," I said.

He went back to his whistling.

From my point of view, I was the kid who kept the biggest, worst secrets. Like my secret ideology, my Happiness Plan. Everything was defined in terms of happiness. "Evil" I defined as "any anti-happiness feeling, idea, or situation." "Fear" was "the state of trying not to become upset." My definition of "slavery," as written in my journal, was "the state of not realizing one's happiness." And "enemies"? "Special kinds of friends that produce love and hate." And just that morning, I recalled, I had written in my journal an

amendment to my set of definitions. “Loneliness: a very complicated feeling that comes from not accepting one’s evil feelings, and from being afraid to accept them. This causes a fear of love.”

How did it all begin? I could barely recall freshman year, when I had decided I had been placed on the planet for the purpose of making others happy. I would stand straight. I stood in front of my full-length mirror to make certain that my posture was just right. I told myself, “I will go along with whatever she says.” And I made my hands taut and my face rigid. I leaned forward and made certain that there was no trace of expression or show of emotion, and I said aloud, “Yes, Master.”

Andrew seemed to have read my mind. “Are you still *happy?*” he asked. He was almost sneering.

“Andrew, I am always happy.”

“I would like to challenge that. It is, by the law of probability, probably not true that you are always happy. Emotions change.”

“I am always happy.”

“Celia says you sound like a robot sometimes. I heard you were crying, and Celia—”

“I was *not* crying, Andrew.”

“You *were*. I heard that you were crying.”

“It’s a lie. A rumor. I was *not* crying.”

“I heard—”

“Well, don’t spread it around, okay?”

Everyone knew that I was Cat’s slave, at least all the kids at school knew. They didn’t know the extent to which she ran my life, though many, once they observed closely enough, figured it out. It began early on, when she started running my social life. She engineered a date for me with a boy I couldn’t stand, Eli P, because she

didn't like the other boy I was running after, and she wanted to put a stop to it. I had never kissed a boy before. When Eli forced his kisses on me, I hated him instantly, his taste, his breath, everything about him.

"Mmm...aren't you having fun, Julie? Kiss him again," said Cat, coming up for breath after kissing Chuck, her boyfriend. "Kiss Eli again. I want to watch." The other kids didn't know about the physical abuse Cat heaped on me, and although that, too, may have been intuited by some of the more perceptive kids, I mentioned it to no one, and only once did I speak of it in my journal. I never mentioned the time she hit me with a chain dog leash, across the legs...

"Hit me again," I said.

And I *wanted out*. This I told myself over and over, in secret. How would I escape? Was suicide the answer? Did I dare to take my own life? Or was that a cop-out? How much more of Cat's tortures could I endure? Or, rather, was I proud of the fact that I could endure so much? Did suffering make me a "better" person than everyone else?

I had to talk to *somebody*. Who could it be? My parents were no use. My brothers were too little. I went through my list of people I knew, one by one, until I reached Celia's older sister, Dina. Maybe I could talk to her. I had talked to her in the past. There was the time she had found me crying in the schoolyard, alone, last year. It was one of the few times I had cried at school. I sat crouched in one of the corners, on the outside of "B" building, wearing my orange knit hat, trying to hide my face, but Dina saw me as she walked past.

"Julie...Julie? You're—hey, you're crying." Dina carried a small army knapsack filled with books, and

wore hiking boots and a wool jacket. Breezes whipped the leaves around the schoolyard. She sat by my side and placed the knapsack at her feet. "Julie, Julie...why are you crying? Why are you upset? You seem *very* upset. You are crying very hard. Here, have a tissue. Blow your nose. There. Now tell me what's bothering you. Tell me. Is it Cat?"

I shook my head "no." Then I said, "Y-yes, it is."

"I thought so. What is wrong?" Dina opened her knapsack and began fishing through it. "What's wrong, Julie? What did she do this time? You can *tell* me. It's *okay*."

"She...she's *mad* at me!"

"So?"

"And I'm *frightened!*"

"Of?"

"I don't *know!*"

"Julie, Cat gets mad at the drop of a hat. You know that. Just...just *breathe*. And have this cookie." Dina produced a peanut butter cookie wrapped in Saran wrap. "I'm going to give you some and I want you to have it. Here." She gave me a piece. "Now, isn't that good? Have another bite. Here, I'll have some. There. It's good, isn't it? Have some more. Cat can't hurt you. You can always tell her to bug off. Remember that. You have the power. Have another bite of cookie."

I remembered that peanut butter cookie well, the way it crumbled in my mouth and slid down my throat. Dina was in college now. I didn't even know what college she went to. Fat chance I could find her now.

And now, the suicidal thoughts were creeping in. Every night, I had to fight them off. One morning, I sat out by the gate at my house, where Joffa sometimes sat,

and held a jackknife to my wrist, rubbing it back and forth, back and forth. I broke the skin, but it didn't bleed. I finally gave up when the air turned too chilly to sit outside anymore. The cut left a visible mark on my wrist that I kept secret until it blended in with the rest of the lines under my palm.

I had written enough suicide notes, but had never thought to put one inside Locker #47, though it had been done a number of times. Sandy B missed a crucial question at a math team meet recently, and felt bummed out for a couple of days. We kept an eye on him and he was okay eventually. The stupid thing was that I could convince myself that I had much bigger reasons to commit suicide than a stupid math meet. Every night I coached myself back into believing there were reasons to live. Yet I acted well, smiled all the time, and kept a cheery front, and if there had been a competition, I would have been voted "Most Optimistic." That was how good a fibber I was.

Sandy B played French horn, and from the band room steps I saw him ambling over across the parking lot toward my hideaway with his French horn case. My back stiffened, because at first I thought it was someone else carrying the French horn—Cat also played it—and

Andrew noticed. "That's not Cat," he said, "it's Sandy." "Those cases are tough to carry," I said. "So is anger."

Shut up, Andrew.

Sandy was short for a boy. So was Andrew. They were barely taller than me, and I was then about five feet tall. Andrew was maybe two inches taller than Sandy. Most of us weren't athletic, and while the rest of the kids in our town were cheering on the Red Sox, just about all of

us were twisting Rubik's Cubes or watching Star Trek instead. When I was much younger I used to think that it was either/or, that God gave people either brains or athletic ability. I tried to pull that one off on the neighborhood kids as an excuse for striking out every time I was up at bat, but it didn't float too well. The truth was that some of us did grow up to be amateur athletes when we finally did grow, and some of us kids were fairly strong, too.

The wind swished around Sandy as he trudged toward us with his French horn. He wore that mustardcolored jacket he always wore, and a starched-looking shirt that I bet his mother pressed for him herself. His face had the innocent shine of a kid who wouldn't dream of having sex before marriage, and would never take drugs. I used to tell myself that if he were as good at French horn as he was at math, he'd be at fucking Juilliard by now. So would a lot of our gang. But many, like Andrew, were tone-deaf, which I found hilariously funny. I aimed to major in music when my turn came to enter college. Good ole Sandy would probably study computers and higher math like Andrew wanted to, and Betsy wanted to be a doctor.

Sandy grinned when he reached us, and said, "She wants to date me." He ran his fingers through his hair, though his hair was too short to run fingers through. A paper flew out of his pocket, which he hastily grabbed and stuffed back in.

"Who?" asked Andrew. He seemed amused, and already skeptical.

"Cat," Sandy replied, matter-of-factly.

He turned the handle of his instrument case back and forth nervously, making little clucking sounds in his

mouth that I could barely hear over the wind, and then that stupid paper fell out of his pocket again. He folded it neatly this time, and shoved it back in his pocket.

Cat. I couldn't figure out which was more unlikely: Sandy liking Cat or Cat liking Sandy. It was about as unlikely as Betsy ever going out with Andrew. The only thing Cat and Sandy had in common was their hair color. Sandy B was one of the most brilliant kids in the school, a member of our "expert" math team, the best in the state. He was wasting his time with her, especially since she wasn't dating him for his brains.

Andrew said, "Sandy, I thought Cat was going after your brother."

"Apparently not."

I was trying my darndest to feign little interest in this conversation, but what went on between Sandy and Cat could make or break what happened to me over the next week or so. I had to play it cool. I was always playing it cool. My ears were always up. I was always tuned in. I was alert and ready to flee, even while asleep. But I kept my mouth shut tight. I guess that's why I could relate so well to the family dog.

"What did you tell her?" Andrew asked. Andrew wasn't one to gossip; ordinarily, Sandy wouldn't have responded so readily.

"She didn't ask me out. She didn't ask anything."

"Well, then, how do you know she wants to date you?"

"She put her arm around me."

"Whoa." Andrew leaned back as if the wind had blown him over.

"She held my hand, like this." Sandy held up both hands, and interlocked his fingers.

“Eww.”

“Then she told me to meet her tonight at Friendly’s for ice cream, and she expects me to treat. Like a *date*. I don’t have a wicked whole lot of money, Andrew.”

“Don’t look at me. I get a quarterly allowance now, and I’m saving it all for Betsy.” Andrew said “quarterly” like it was supposed to sound really grown up, as if he was actually keeping a budget like an adult would.

Sandy took the piece of paper out of his pocket.

“Lemme see that,” said Andrew.

“It’s nothing.”

“Lemme see.”

“It’s Cat’s chem homework. I’ll do it for her tonight.”

“Sandy,” I began—I was always the one to want to squelch conflict—“how much do you need?” As unlikely a pair as Cat and Sandy were, I *had* to force this to work out somehow, because if it didn’t, I was the one who would get the brunt of it all. Sandy had to have enough money for the date and that was all there was to it, because if he didn’t, she’d be mad, and when she came home, she’d take it out on me, over the phone, or the next day when she saw me. *It’s all your fault, Julie. You’re a lousy friend. You and your stupid family. I want you to carry these heavy boxes upstairs. Now! I want you to do it till your back hurts! Do it!* I had to make this odd couple stick tight for a while, and though I’d given up on prayer long ago I thought if I made a wish, I could wish that Cat would become immersed in Sandy so much that she would leave me alone, allow me some space, some time, some freedom, and maybe I could write to Maria...

I reached deep into my Levi’s pocket—the pair just like Cat’s—and found a twenty dollar bill. “Keep it.”

Sandy gasped. “Julie, what are you doing giving me that kind of money?”

“That should keep her happy.”

“You’re rich.”

“I baby-sit.”

Andrew whispered, “You’re desperate.” As if from a dream, Betsy’s flute floated from the room, and mixed with the sound of the wind brushing the leaves against the asphalt.

“Andrew, shut up.” And to Sandy: “What are you going to order? Banana split? Jim Dandy? Or just a cone with Jimmies?”

Andrew said, “What’s *she* going to order, you mean. ‘Kiss me, Sandy, c’mon, kiss me, just one on the cheek, now on the lips, a French kiss just like that, umm just like that.’ Smooch smooch Sandy!” Sandy turned red and giggled.

Andrew said, “What’s *she* going to order? ‘C’mon, Sandy, just a few more bucks’—smooch smooch—‘a few more bucks.’ Are you good and embarrassed, Julie, because you should be. She’s *your* so-called friend, after all, and you’re *her*—well, never mind. ‘C’mon, Sandy, let’s do drugs—”

“Now wait a minute,” I said to Andrew. “Cat doesn’t do drugs.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“She doesn’t.” Betsy’s flute hit a decisive high C.

“If she told you, Julie, to take LSD, would you take it? If she said, ‘I *order* you to take LSD,’ would you?”

My heart banged in my chest. *Breathe. Act normal.* Something caught in my throat. My head spun, everything spinning. Grabbing the railing, my fist closing around it. Feeling sick to my stomach...Would I?

I had already dropped friends because she told me to, given up on boyfriends, gone broke, failed classes, quit Hebrew school, quit jobs, defied my parents, wasted my entire life...Would I take LSD? Would I take poison? Would I...kill myself? Because she told me to?

What did LSD look like? Was it a pill? I imagined Cat holding a pill and shoving it into my mouth, into the back of my throat. *Swallow! Swallow! Do as I say!*

I glanced at Andrew, just looked at his feet, and said, "Well."

"Is that all? 'Well'?"

"Yes."

"A well is a deep subject."

"Some deep subjects are best dropped, Andrew."

1982

Family Therapy

Diana said, “Mr. and Mrs. Greene, this is our last family therapy session at Crossroads Day Treatment before Julie leaves for Vermont. Julie has been here nine months. Is there anything you’d like to say to her?”

My father took a notebook out of his shirt pocket. He always took notes at our sessions. He was wearing a white shirt that had been dry cleaned at the Chinese laundry. That’s what my mother called it. She brought his work shirts there once a week. My mother was wearing a tiger-print dress and sneakers.

“Mr. Greene,” said Diana, “could you put that notebook away, just this once? We’re talking to Julie now.”

My father mumbled something about “losing track of the main issues raised in the meeting.”

“Well,” said my mother, nodding approvingly to my father as he pocketed the notebook, “I’d like to remind Julie to get her car tuned up before she leaves.” She crossed her arms triumphantly and waited for Diana’s response. My father loosened his tie.

“Tell *Julie*,” said Diana. “She is sitting here, with us.”

“Erna,” said my father to my mother, “Ned will tune up Julie’s car. You don’t have to remind her about that.” He turned in his chair to face my mother.

My mother said, “Julie’s car still needs lots of repairs. And she’s constantly borrowing mine. And she *smokes* in there! She’s still *smoking*! It makes my car *stink*!”

My father said, “Julie *has* to quit smoking!”

“Smoking is bad for you!”

“Very bad!”

“And the coffee!” My mother threw her arms in the air. “Alan,” my mother went on, “at least she’s got Irene. She’s got a *friend* now.”

“Irene smokes—”

“A light smoker, Alan—”

“Light, schmight. It’s still smoking!”

“Julie smokes in her room! It *stinks* in there!”

“Very stinky!”

“Pee-eww!” My mother pinched her nose exaggeratedly.

Diana held her hands in a “T.” “Mr. and Mrs. Greene, we can easily get hung up on the smoking issue, but I don’t think that’s the point here. We are saying goodbye to Julie.”

My father grimaced. “It’s this *program* that got Julie smoking!”

“Yes, this program! I see those *men* all smoking out there, pacing back and forth! They litter! They throw their cigarettes on the ground!” My mother’s voice escalated into a high-pitched yell.

“No wonder this city is a mess!” yelled my father.

“Litter!”

“Alan.” My mother’s voice suddenly lowered. “Did you remember to take out the trash this morning? That’s another thing, Diana. Julie didn’t do a single household chore the whole time she was here. She used my car and drove around all day long with *Irene*.”

My father said, “She’s gotten lazy since she dropped out of college.”

“Oh, yes, lazy! And fat!”

“Irene is fat, too,” my father pointed out.

“But at least she’ll have a *roommate* when she returns to Vermont—Irene! Isn’t that wonderful? I didn’t like

Julie living all by herself in that tiny place in North Bennington, did you, Alan? No, not I. A roommate!”

My father muttered, “She’d better say a proper goodbye to her *grandmother*.” He reached for his notebook, then stopped himself.

“Well,” said my mother, “I’ll be glad to have my car back, and I’ll put an air freshener in it, as soon as Julie’s gone.”

After the session, Diana took me aside and asked me what I thought. I said, “I don’t really think smoking and the car are what we should be talking about in a family therapy session.” I wiped my nose with a tissue.

“No?” said Diana, smiling. “I guess they didn’t choose the most appropriate way to say goodbye to you.”

“They didn’t say anything *to me*, Diana.”

Diana said softly, “No, but I have something to say to you. Watch out for Irene. She may not be the best roommate for you.”

I inhaled. “What?”

“Just what I said. I have seen the way she operates. I have heard what she says to you. I think you should *get out* while you can. Tell her now. Tell her you don’t want her coming up to Vermont with you. *Tell her*. Your name is on the lease. I’m warning you.”

“What? You’ve got to be kidding! This is ridiculous! I can’t just—”

“Yes, you can.”

“Diana, I want a better life for Irene. With me. I’m *devoted* to Irene. She loves my dog. She’s fun. She listens. She cares. What more could I ask for in a friend?”

“There are plenty of other people out there who will love your dog, and are fun, and listen, and care.” “But Irene is *special*,” I insisted.

“Julie, Irene is using you.”

“Irene *needs* me. There’s a difference.”

“And you should be very careful,” Diana warned, “of needy people, because they can pull you downhill along with them. Fast.”

1982

Lunch

“Julie, I’m really glad we got over our shoplifting phase. That’s all it really was, just a phase, right?” Irene and I were sitting in Demmie’s, a restaurant near Crossroads Day Treatment. We’d been at Crossroads for six months. “I wasn’t doing anything wrong, after all. I deserved those jeans. They should of let me keep them. You know, I’m on fucking Welfare, and I really deserve a break now and then, so I hope those cops don’t come after me. It was really *you* that deserved to get nabbed.” “I suppose.” I sipped my Tab thoughtfully.

“It’s been a month since they caught us. I’ll never go shoplifting at a *mall* again. Only small places, where they don’t have cameras. We should of guessed that that was a two-way mirror.”

“I was stupid for not figuring it out, Irene. I could’ve prevented the whole thing.”

“You’re damn right. Why don’t you eat something?”

“I’m okay, Irene. Eat your salad.”

“The fucking mall security have technology coming out of their butts. I haven’t gotten a summons from the State. I think I’m in the clear, don’t you? Don’t you? This salad is asinine, really asinine. You were with me. They should of caught you, not me.”

“I was the one that deserved to get caught, if you say so, Irene,” I said. “After all, I’m not on Welfare like you are. I’m not struggling like you are.”

“Right. So long as this whole muck doesn’t get back to the people at Crossroads. I don’t know what I’d do if *they* found out.”

“They won’t, Irene, trust me.”

“Like I told the cops, I grew up in a slum in fucking Dorchester, with nothing but niggers in the neighborhood.”

“You deserve a break, Irene.”

Irene lit a cigarette. She hadn’t touched her Greek salad. “Julie, aren’t you going to have anything?”

“No, you eat.”

“Wait till I finish my ciggie. What do you think of Rick, really? And the doctor at Crossroads? Do you think they’re trying to screw me over with the Ativan? Be honest. They’re trying to pull a fast one on me, don’t you think?”

“In terms of what?”

“When I was in the hospital, I swear, Julie, they gave me eight Ativan a day. Eight. I come to

Crossroads. They lower it to four. Then to three. I need *more*. I need as many as required. PRN. That means as many as I want. Right? Right?”

“What’s PRN?”

“That’s some *Latin* words. It means as many as you want. I’m supposed to get Ativan whenever I ask for it. That was the way I had it in the *hawspital*. Now, they’re trying to limit me. They say it’s *addicting*, that I should get *off* it. I’ve been trying to compensate by taking my friend’s Valiums. I’ve got a couple of bottles of those stashed in here.” She nodded to her pocketbook. “I deserve it. I get bad *anxiety*. And don’t tell me it isn’t true. Because it is true. You know me, Julie, how I get. You saw me the other day when Jackson looked me over. I shook! You saw me shaking, Julie. You saw how I shook like a leaf. Tell me you saw me shaking, didn’t you?”

“I saw you shaking, Irene.”

“It was from anxiety, Julie. Anxiety requires meds. Strong meds, like Ativan.”

“Of course. They should let you have as much as you want,” I said.

“Those jerks, Rick and the doctor.” “Jerks,” I echoed.

“You sure you don’t want anything to eat, Julie?”

“You haven’t taken even a puff on your ciggie, Irene.”

Irene took a drag. “There. Were the Martians bothering you earlier? You looked disturbed, very disturbed, in Group this morning.”

“I have a cold.”

“You need meds, Julie. You should try some of my Ativan. That might get rid of them.”

“I don’t dare take other people’s pills.”

“No sweat, I’ll give you some.”

“Forget it.”

“Julie, the people at Crossroads don’t even *notice* you. You’re so quiet. Scream or something.”

“Don’t worry about me. Eat up.”

Irene nibbled on her salad. “This salad sucks. I’m pitching it. Let’s go.” She picked up her salad, scuttled to the trash, tossed it in with a dramatic fling. Startled restaurant customers stared at her. I glanced at her barely-smoked cigarette in the ashtray, and then at my feet. We exited the restaurant, Irene first, I following, and headed back to Crossroads Day Treatment.

1975-1980

Hunger:

Like I Needed a Drug

Rather than kill myself, I endured the remainder of Lexington High School, and then ran away from home in the traditional manner – in other words, I went off to college at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. I especially wanted to be near Maria, though I had not seen her for five years. There were several close calls in which Cat and I almost ended up at the same college. “We can be roommates!” she said, but I slyly talked her out of it by reminding her that the skiing would be excellent in Utah.

Once I got to UMass, I told no one that I had just escaped abuse. I majored in music and I suppose that in doing so, I was seeking those campfire songs I still craved. I arrived at college early for marching band training, and had the dorm room to myself. When I came back to my room after a sweaty day on the field, a cheery sign was posted on my door indicating that my roommate’s name was Jane.

I closed the door behind me, muttering, “Please, dear God, don’t let Jane be like *her*.”

But Jane was hardly like Cat. The first thing I noticed about her was her eyes. They looked spacey, dilated. “It’s true,” she said, as she unpacked her army duffel. “I like pot. I like pot a lot.” And then she giggled, a sound I would grow to love.

That evening, she and a bunch of her hippie friends sat in a circle on the floor, smoking a “bong.” I had never seen such a fancy pipe before! I wanted to try it, but was afraid to. Cat had forbidden me to do drugs. But

wasn't I out of Cat's clutches now? I watched as each of them held in the smoke for as long as they could, and then released it. This looked like fun. But instead, I sat at my desk, and studied for the coming semester, trying to inhale as much of the thick smoke as I could.

It was Jane who introduced me to Joni Mitchell, and on Jane's recommendation, I purchased my first Joni Mitchell album, *For the Roses*. Over and over I listened to the song, "Banquet." *Who let the greedy in, and who left the needy out? Who made this salty soup? Tell 'em we're all hungry, now, for a sweeter fare...*

I listened to a heck of a lot of classical music, which was a given in the music department. Trumpet music especially. We listened to every rendition we could find of "the Haydn," meaning the Haydn trumpet concerto, or "the Humml," or Bach's Second Brandenburg Concerto. Anything that had a trumpet in it.

I played crazy duets with the other trumpet players, and talked about "chops." There were a whole gang of us. People sometimes asked me why I was so weird.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I'm just crazy, I guess," I answered. "Insane."

"You study and practice all day and get straight A's," said Annie, one of the trumpet players. "Why don't you just loosen up, and be normal like us? Party a little, have some fun, maybe?"

"It's just that we can't figure her out," said Robert. "Maybe she *is* crazy."

Annie said, "Maybe she belongs in a *loony bin*, huh, Robert?" They all laughed. No, I would *not* tell them about Cat.

I ran away from college. It got too scary. I took a job as a nanny in Vermont, seeking love in a family other

than my own, hoping this was the answer. I had never lived in a rural area before. To wake up in the morning with cows at my door and to step outside into the wilderness was a wonder to me. The children, I believed, loved me, and I them, though at the age of twenty I was scarcely old enough to be in a position to care for them properly. The youngest was especially fond of me. In the evening I sat at my desk and wrote for hours to my pen-pals, telling them about the countryside and my adventures with the children, and then the youngest would appear at my door. I felt a certain sadness to see this boy, he standing there in his pajamas, holding a bit of his blanket, with his fingers in his mouth, waiting, always waiting, for me to come upstairs and read him a story.

After a year I took a vacation and went hitchhiking across the country with my dog, still searching for answers. How green were the hills of Pennsylvania, and the scent of the Carolinas so fresh and alive! I remember unwrapping Starburst candies in an eighteen-wheeler while listening to the Moody Blues' *In Search of the Lost Chord* while the truck barreled over the Smokey Mountains like a snake.

Then I traveled westward, to California! Ah, those sandy hills! Where one could sleep under the stars and never get wet! Here, I found what I thought I had been looking for. It was a religious group that called itself The Family.

I met them quite by chance in San Francisco, while wandering the streets aimlessly with Hoofy, my dog. Two men, Perry and Bo, came bounding up toward me, laughing and petting Hoofy, and asking me my name. I told them, and we began to converse. "We live in sort of

a commune,” said Perry. “Just a few blocks from here. It’s really a neat place.”

“A commune! Now, that’s my style!” I said, excitedly, hoping for an invitation to visit, and perhaps, a place to stay overnight as well, while I explored San Francisco.

“You can come for lunch,” said Bo. “We do ask for a small donation, though.”

Lunch consisted of beans and rice in a delicious sauce. “We eat vegetarian,” Bo explained. Crowds of people gathered around a cloth-covered table, spooning food for themselves onto ceramic plates. There was a bustle of commotion.

“Oh, that’s neat,” I said, blowing on my beans to cool them. I could barely hear Bo over the noise of people in the hall.

“We have sort of a camp where we have retreats, just north of here. Would you like to come for the weekend? It’s just a small donation...”

I agreed. We traveled to Boonville, California, in a large van that seated perhaps fourteen passengers, and I had my Hoofy by my side, which made the experience unique for me among the guests. The van finally stopped. Tall pines surrounded a small parking lot. Beyond it was a crudely built suspension footbridge that passed over a brook. Perry led the way. We followed him over the bridge and into the camp. Wait— was it... Kiwanee? Cabins in a circle, just like those at Kiwanee! And a campfire! People singing! Surely, this was paradise!

Bo invited me to a “lecture.” I thought it was terrific that this group called themselves The Family, so I wanted to see what made them tick. I was enjoying the singing and the food so much that I was in fact curious

about their philosophy, though the thought of a “lecture” did not excite me much. I wondered if I would have to take notes.

The lecture was taught by Bobbie, an enthusiastic woman, who spoke of love, and the “Ideal World,” and God. God! So these people believed in God! I had forgotten about God. God is love, Bobbie said. God loves us like a father. God cares about us. Nobody has ever loved us so much as God loves us now. And we sang songs, and prayed to the Heavenly Father, and at once I believed, and opened my heart, and embraced these strangers as if I had known them all my life.

I stayed with The Family another week while we sang, wept, and prayed together. But one day, while I was petting Hoofy, caressing the soft fur behind his ears, I began to feel guilt over The Family’s introduction of Christ into our beliefs. Was I not a Jew? I had been taught that there was only one God, and that no human could ever be worshipped as God. Yet many of the other Jews in the “beginners group,” of which I was part, had readily accepted everything The Family had told them. In fact, the hardcore members of The Family, who had been around for months or years, took what they learned in the lectures as a given. I thought about the increasing sizes of “small donations” The Family was requesting, the dopey feeling I felt after eating their overly-starched and sugary food, and the fact that I was only allowed five hours of sleep each night. As Hoofy whimpered softly, I pictured Perry and Bo: their tired, glazed, bloodshot eyes, the pasty look on their faces. The word “brainwashing” came into my head, and I could not get rid of the word; it flashed before me like a banner. I left The Family the following day, griefstricken.

I returned to my nanny job in Vermont, but found myself unfocused on the children and instead focused on my search for God. I tried several churches in town but found no God there. I swore off sex. I prayed several times a day under a tree just outside my room. I knelt in the grass, felt the dirt and the ants and the little stones under my knees, and clasped my hands together, saying aloud, “Heavenly Father, thank you for this day, for my life. Please, don’t leave me!” But the clouds in the sky did not part. Tears formed in my eyes and a great heaviness would not leave me. Gradually my connection with God became weaker and more remote.

I prayed harder. I felt lonely for God and lonely for God’s love and the love of The Family in California. I wistfully recalled the songs The Family had sung together in California, how we had slept together under the stars, sung songs to God with guitars, held hands and wept—and yes, it had been almost exactly like summer camp. One day I went to a music store, seeking campfire songs. I sat on the store floor and pored through religious songbooks, trying to find the songs we’d sung together. Wasn’t one called, “They’ll Know We’re God’s Children by Our Love,” and one called, “Sailing with Our Father,” and one called “No Man is an Island?” I spent a half hour sitting on the worn, brown carpet, leafing through the books until the store was nearly closed, then collected myself and bought several spiritual songbooks that I still own. I tried to sing the songs and accompany myself on guitar. I wasn’t very good at it.

I pursued God with such mad frenzy! My frustration increased. I kept my quest secret. I was becoming delusional, and hid myself more and more. I couldn’t reach God so I reached for food. Late at night, when the

children had been put to bed and the adults had retired to their rooms, I made peanut butter sandwiches on homemade bread and spooned leftover potato-leek soup into my mouth directly from the cold pot in the refrigerator. Sometimes I had bowl after bowl of Life cereal in a Bennington Potters mixing bowl. Once, I found some delicious crackers in the cereal cabinet. They were somewhat like graham crackers, but sweeter and creamier. One of the adults (there were three) had stashed them there. The crackers were all the more delicious because they were so very forbidden. I ate because God had slipped away from me, I ate to compensate for my loss, I ate to forget—to forget that I had been singled out by God for what I believed to be a special purpose, and now that my link to God had been severed, all was lost. God had cut me off, pushed me away. I was marked, despicable, and Evil, Evil, Evil—this I couldn't get out of my head.

This occurred one year prior to the onset of my illness, and this is important because many people have religious experiences just prior to illness. Is the religious awakening genuine or delusional? This is a great subject of debate among people with mental illnesses.

Are people natural seekers of God? Would we seek God if we had no preconception of one? Certainly, getting a taste of God, a first-hand revealing of this God to us, no matter how brief, would whet our appetites, like the action of heroin, making us want more. With this religious group I had such an awakening. Prior to this I had been unconvinced that there was any God. Now I knew I had to have God, as had been revealed to me, and I would give anything to get this God back.

This was a God I sensed, deep in my heart. This was a parent-god, this was a God who guided me and showed me the way. I could pray to this God about a problem I was having in my life, and God would provide a solution, or help me figure one out. Unlike my parents, this God would help me grow, and teach me about life, and guide me with love, patience, and understanding, this God that I needed like a drug.

In mid-June, I took two days off from my nanny job, and climbed a mountain, Baker Peak, with Hoofy, on an overnight trip, bringing no food with me, no flashlight or tent. I started at noon. How bright the forest seemed, how massive the rocks along the trail! When I reached the peak, the sky, so perfectly clear, clamored about me noisily, and I stood and prayed, and I felt God circling me, saying, "*King me, king me, little girl! I have this game wrapped up...*" God's presence then removed itself from me, and I could no longer summon it. I wept, and clenched my fists, and beat my chest. In my grief, I knew now that I was on a quest leading to a secret place, a special, forbidden place, and that I must tell no one. I descended the mountain.

When I reached Griffith Lake, halfway down, I removed my clothes, placing them on a rock. I removed my glasses and placed them on top of my clothes. I lowered myself into the lake. I wasn't at all cold. I felt mud between my toes, rocks at my knees, and the quickness of my heart knowing that no one had any clue where I was. Should I drown, I would not be found for months. The water pulled me in further, until I was over my head. I could barely see Hoofy, waiting at the shore.

When I came back home, I knew I had a secret. There was something special about me. I was marked, I was

Evil. I was marked, too, because I had gained a little weight. Ten pounds. To me, it was fifty. I thought about it constantly, and it was at this point that my obsession—or “obsession” was the word for it now—shifted over, from a God-obsession to weight-obsession. This shift was completely imperceptible because weightobsession seemed just as righteous and holy to me. My body was marked and imperfect. My fat was an indication of greed and selfishness. I had drifted away from God and this was the consequence, and because I was fat and everyone could see that I was a sinner, I felt shame, guilt, and embarrassment. Everyone knew now that I was weak and that I had poor self-control. It was written on the body.

I could not get the ten pounds off my mind, but I kept the gain secret. Looking back, it’s possible that very few people noticed. I had no choice, I believed, but to begin a crash diet as soon as I could. I waited until my nanny job ended and I was out on my own again— July first. That was when I began to attend Bennington College full time. I bought a scale and kept it secret, hiding it on a shelf where no one would find it. Each morning, when I was naked, I took the scale down from its shelf, carefully so that no one would hear the springs, and weighed myself, feeling the rough surface of the scale under my feet, shivering in the cold of the early morning. The odd thing was that I lived alone, and no one ever came over to visit, or heard the scale, or entered the bathroom, but I felt it necessary to follow these rituals. I wrote down my weight in a little yellow notebook that I kept hidden inside a book on my bookshelf: one hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight...I no longer have the little yellow notebook.

I hesitate to mention which fad diet I followed, but because at the time it had been a rather popular one for years, and it was followed by scandal, I think I will: I followed, at first, the Scarsdale “Medical” Diet, the vegetarian version. Every morning, I sat at my corner kitchen table and dutifully ate my half grapefruit and whole wheat toast, accompanied by black coffee, which I enjoyed in a tiny ceramic teacup. The cold in the apartment was unbearable. For lunch, I frequently ate nothing, or fruit salad with a bit of cottage cheese, and for dinner, a slice of bread and vegetables, always under 1,000 calories a day. The diet book is still in print, though the great diet doctor has quite some time ago been murdered by his lover, Jean Harris (Perhaps she followed his diet!). I cannot say I have ever been the same since starting the diet, though at the time I didn’t know if the “diet” or “worrying about my weight” was to blame. In other words, I didn’t know which was the worse of the two problems: the behavior (restricting food intake) or the thinking behind it (weight and food obsession), and I’m not sure these problems can be separated. In fact, losing weight was only part of the grand quest. You can see where I was headed, and it wasn’t a good place. I got skinny, and I have never been the same since.

**III. She Whispers,
She Speaks,
She Screams.**

1990

The Graduate

The others were seated in a circle, and I sat in the center. I wanted to close my eyes, as if closing them would make me invisible, but instead I focused on the area of tiled floor between the other Crossroads clients and staff and myself, and on my socks and shoes, and the background sound of pipes creaking in the makeshift gym as people gathered into the circle. If I'd glanced around, perhaps the scene would have calmed me: the familiar arts and crafts paraphernalia neatly put away in bins in the corner, the meager sports equipment stowed under the basketball hoop for a rare game of street hockey or volleyball, and two or three white-out boards in the corner for "group." A breeze picked up each time the door opened and more people came down the stairs and entered the gym. I was thirty-two years old, and this was the second and last time that I attended Crossroads Day Treatment in Boston.

My hands were stained with ink from a drawing I'd done earlier that day in Liza's group, Expressive Therapy. I had despised the drawing, but Liza said it had meaning. I was Liza's favorite. Many times during my stay at Crossroads, I had told her that I loved her.

"I love *working* with you," she had said, her words stinging like the bites of black flies.

Now, two women came giggling down the stairs, followed by a few of the male clients, shabbily dressed, after having tossed their cigarettes aside to attend the ceremony. Maura, the program secretary, popped into the room, her red hair bobbing, followed by the program director, Doreen, both dressed in deep reds and browns.

The door closed. People shuffled to their seats. All was silent. The door swung open again and into the room swept Liza.

I felt my back stiffen. There was no turning back now.

Liza took three steps forward into the circle. Though she was not nearly close enough, I could feel her breath upon me. She held a small tape recorder. She had explained to me earlier that day, “This is so that you will always remember us. You will always carry us with you.” She switched the recorder on, and placed it on the floor near me. “Who wants to say something to

Julie, to say goodbye to her?”

1981

**At the Crossroads:
Conversation with the Past**

It was time for lunch at Crossroads Day Treatment. Irene and Tim D had each separately asked me to eat with them, but I stole away to my car (my mother's car, actually), because I didn't want to eat lunch with anyone; in fact, I didn't want to eat lunch at all. I was fasting that day.

It's hard enough to have a problem that nobody can perceive but you, but it's ten times harder to be told that your problem is "all in your head," meaning that you're making it up or imagining it. Mental illness is as real as any other. But this was what I was told, and what people around me that *knew* or *found out* about my illness—family, faculty, fellow students—assumed when they heard that I had "head trouble." Fear of success. Fear of growing up. Fear of death. Of course I was making it all up. Of course.

I had two hours to fill. I didn't want to drive back home, if I could call my parents' place "home," for it truly wasn't. I was homesick for college, for music, for the love of learning. I wanted to banish the thought. But it was strange that I had hardly thought about the academics of school after I dropped out. I hadn't composed a note of music or practiced trumpet once. I was deep, deep into something horrible, a stench, an enveloping goo, a dark, air-stripped tunnel of hate so intense that music, no matter how beloved, could not penetrate it. But now, I had an idea. And I didn't want it on my parents' telephone bill.

I gathered together some change. Not enough. So I stopped at a nearby convenience store, bought a Fresca, secured some quarters, and located a reliable pay phone that afforded reasonable privacy.

I knew my advisor's number by heart. I hadn't dialed it many times, but the number was an easy one to remember. I didn't know if I was shaking from hunger or from nerves. "Yes, Jack?"

"Who is this?"

"It's...it's Julie."

"It's who?"

"Julie. Julie Greene."

"Oh."

"I...um..."

"What do you want?"

"I just thought I'd say 'Hello.' To let you know...to let you know I'll come back to school, I promise, after I work a few things out. Just a few problems, that's all. Like I explained when I left."

Jack Levin, as my advisor and instructor at Bennington College, could be intimidating at times. At other times he was kind, and at all times he was an impeccable teacher and ally. But when I told him back in

July that I was leaving school because of "psychological" problems, his demeanor changed. It was as if his attitude toward me had undergone an eclipse. His whole face fell in. "You're my top student," he had said. "You're doing so well." We were standing outside of Jennings, Bennington's music building, and the sun was blinding my vision. I shaded my eyes with my hand.

"I'm not, actually," I had replied. "There are things. Things you don't know, nobody knows. I can't tell you. I need to see a doctor. Soon. I need to move in with my

parents. I can't be alone anymore. I can't bear this. Just believe me."

"If you leave now, Julie, with only one semester left to go until graduation, don't you think—"

"I must."

Jack shook his head. He was a good foot taller than me, and somewhat heavysset. "Okay." He sighed, looking out over the fields. "But there's one thing, Julie. If you leave now, you'll get involved in something. You'll get distracted. I don't think you'll ever come back."

Now, standing in the phone booth, I felt just as intimidated by him.

The phone line crackled. "Jack?"

"What do you want from me?"

"I just need to know that you still believe in me, that's all."

"Julie, I don't have all day to talk to you."

"Sorry."

"Is there anything else?"

"I go to a program now." No response. "A special program. I just started. It's supposed to help me. Um, Jack?" I breathed. "A lot of the people smoke there.

Cigarettes, I mean."

"What do you want *me* to do about it?" "I guess I'd better go." I hung up.

1980

Kohlrabi

You're going to allow yourself kohlrabi for dinner, one pale green kohlrabi, peeled, diced, plain, raw, fortyeight calories per cup; it might taste good, and you like kohlrabi even though this one's large and bound to be a tough one, so you peel it, or try to; a neighbor walks by on the porch and you wince in your mind at the thought of anyone, anyone seeing you eating nothing but kohlrabi for dinner; your place always smells of vegetable soup and you want to pull the curtain, but doing so would seem unfriendly, so you close the curtain halfway (on pretense of keeping the sun out, or so you'll say should anyone ask) and you return to the kohlrabi, which is keeling around on the counter; you steady the kohlrabi and try to peel it again; skin so tough it reminds you of a certain type of tree bark, the way it stuck to a stick if the stick was too green, the kind of green stick that won't burn in a campfire; you peel the kohlrabi and there's no end to the peeling, you gnash at it with knuckles and thumbnails until at last, at last, you reach the quick of the kohlrabi. There it is, the juicy center. Peeling, peeling the skin—delicate, soft, tart, stringless, firm, perfect—it must be isolated; the peel must come down, but whether the forty-eight calories include the peel is another question entirely that you want to put out of your mind but you cannot. You think of your fat, not the fat that everyone sees but your private fat, the fat that only you can see, the fat that *must go now*. This fat is the reason why what you weigh now is an unacceptable weight for you. It is okay for other people to weigh what the charts say, but you must be thin—thin because you

are *special*, not at all like others, and need to be rid of that *private* fat that is the secret badness in your core that keeps you evil. And as you utter this word a new word forms— “Evil!” only it is spoken by another, by *It*.

“Evil!” you say back to *It*.

“We are going to get you good, fucker!” *It* says.

Backed up to the wall now, kohlrabi spilled on the floor, your knife in your hand.

“You! You! Your secret fat will be exposed to all We will see to that We will see to that We will see to that.”

Everything gray and you tell yourself you are stupid with the knife. You throw it into the sink and crouch down by the door everything is gray everything is gray and fat.

“You! You! We will get you.”

The grayness is almost complete then the buzz in your head and you know that’s where *It* is, in the back, the back of your head, you can’t remove *It*, *It* lives there, in your head. “Get out!”

“Get out!” Your fingers running through your hair trying to find *It*. “Get out!” But *It* is already gone for now but the grayness is still there.

And you taste kohlrabi the next day and the next, in the laundromat where the bums nod to you and you can’t wash the kohlrabi out of your clothes and the gray tide seeps into your shoes and jams into your toes and you can’t rid the kohlrabi stench, Jack Levin’s perfect gray O’s bubbling out of his mouth, he is dead, dead, students dangling in the bath, and everywhere you taste kohlrabi, even in your coffee; kohlrabi even in the blade of grass you put into your gray mouth, your mind so absent now

—
“fucker”

“get out...get...out—”

the tiniest kohlrabi

“Everything must go now! We will see to that We will see to that”

...kohlrabi, kohlrabi, kohlrabi...

1974

**Locker #47:
Cat's Poison**

I didn't stick around the band room to find out the outcome of Andrew's love poem written for Betsy. Instead, I headed back to Locker #47. Classes had been let out now for about an hour, but fellow students were milling around, those involved in extracurricular work at the high school, and others staying late doing detention. I didn't want to look in *those* rooms, but had to walk past them to get to Locker #47. It was in a corner hallway, an unassigned locker or one abandoned by a student or perhaps—horrors!—the student had dropped out, but why? My classmates and I spent a good many afternoons speculating about the student who once was assigned Locker #47. Had she become pregnant? Involved with drugs? Killed in an accident? Or was the locker's unassigned status simply an oversight on the part of faculty or administration? If it had been the latter, it would have been a great disappointment to us all.

A bulb had burned out in the corner above the locker, so everything around it was dark and shadowy: the other lockers, the tiled floor, the cobwebby area above the lockers. If there was anything new inside the locker, it would be hard to read, with less light coming in from the windows now that the sun was so low in the sky. Still, I was fairly certain there was a new paper in the locker.

On one side was someone's chemistry quiz. The paper had been ripped in half so I could only see the bottom of it. It was not from Mr. Bailey's class, interestingly enough. All of us nerdy kids took Mr. Bailey's chemistry class. It was known to be the toughest and best. Mr.

Bailey allowed his students to use slide rules while taking his exams, the tests were that tough. On the other side of the paper was a short paragraph someone had handwritten:

A prisoner saves all ambition for the day he is set free, but upon leaving prison, he again makes trouble with the law, and finds himself back in the same prison from which he was released, that he hated so much, picking at the dust in the corner of his cell. Now his hatred has been foisted back upon himself.

The paragraph was signed “S.B.” Sandy? He was an easygoing kid. But I was certain of it. I turned the paper over. Whose chem quiz? The handwriting was unmistakable—it was Cat’s. Sandy had written that grim paragraph on the back of one of Cat’s chemistry quizzes. *She had poisoned him.* I was about to put the paper back into the locker, but I saw below Sandy’s note a P.S. in Maria’s handwriting:

“*You choose your friends. It is your life. You have the right to say ‘no.’*”

Could this be for real? How could she—but the writing faded fast. I felt like crying. I wanted the writing to linger right there a bit longer, so I could trace every curve with my eyes the way I once held her hand in mine, while we sat across from each other in “B” cabin, and I felt each finger, each fingernail, each knuckle.

I put the paper back in the locker and closed the door as noiselessly as I could.

Dan appeared then, and I didn’t know if he was real or a mirage until he was right next to me and I could smell the laundry detergent in his shirt. “Crunch,” he said.

“What are you doing here so late?”

“Math team practice. Then we played some Dungeons and Dragons.”

“How is that going?” I asked.

“It is going.” Maria, holding a single daisy.

“Well? Who won?”

“I have told you: no one wins at Dungeons and Dragons. We all win. We all lose. It is a game that never ends.”

“Then you run and run...until you turn to butter?” I laughed, then immediately covered my mouth. “You’ve been writing too much poetry.” *And everywhere ferns were growing...*

And day would end with the trees singing...

“We’ve got to fill the locker with something,” I said.

“I, and the others, notice that you are troubled,” he said. He stiffened, and his steel eyes hardened, as though he were as far away as she was.

“Are you okay?”

“I am okay, person. Just thinking.” But he appeared pained, suicidal.

“Thinking. It is good to think,” I said.

“Yes.” I wanted to touch her, to hold her, to tell her everything. But she was gone. And so was Dan.

Was it a good thing or a bad thing that a handful of other kids worried about me? Some of the other kids tried to psychoanalyze me, and did a bad job of it, while others were right on the mark. And last weekend there had been the incident with the doll, the hairless doll that I had dragged out from the corner of my closet, with her nose half gone, her eyes falling off. She looked like she’d been played with many, many times, years ago, and then forgotten.

So this doll, this Raggedy Ann, was going to be Cat. And I would practice on her, just as Maria had instructed in her letter to me. I would tell her how I felt. I would let out my *feelings*. I would let go of all that pentup anger. It would help me, Maria had written, even if I didn't have the courage to say these things out loud, because it would help me *recognize my feelings*. Or at least that's what Maria said. I didn't understand it. What was there to recognize? I was happy, wasn't I? I was always happy. Wasn't that enough of a feeling? I wanted out, too. And I was desperate. Those, too, were feelings. Oh, how confusing life was!

There was a knock on my bedroom door. "What is it?" I called out. I could tell it was my father even before he said anything. I could hear it in the knock and by the way he breathed in before he spoke. "Julie," he said, "time for supper."

"I'm *coming*, Dad," I said. "Just a sec." He opened the door. I rushed to hide the doll.

"Your mother really wants you to come soon," he said. "It's Shabbos."

"Yeah, okay."

Once the door was safely closed again, I brought Raggedy Ann out from her hiding place under my pillow, noticing the tear in her arm. I grabbed her by her intact arm and brought her to my full-length mirror. "See?" I said to her in my mind. "See who you are? See what you do to me? To the one you call your 'best friend'?" I lifted my shirtsleeve, revealing bruise marks on my shoulder. "Want to see more? Eh?" I lifted the bottom of my shirt, and then my bra. "See those black and blue marks on my boobs? *See* them? *You* did that.

You. ou pinched me on my breast. Hard.” I lowered my bra.

Tell her how you feel, Julie. Out loud.

I paced with the doll now, back and forth, back and forth, nearly tripping over the mess in my room. I had not yet said a word aloud. My teeth gritted, my hands seized, even my feet tensed, yet I could not utter a sound. Why was I mute?

Tell her. You can say it. Tell her, “Fuck you.”

“Julie, suppertime!” My mother, calling from downstairs.

“Yes, Mother! In a minute!” *Tell her.*

I took three quick, deep breaths. I held the Raggedy Ann doll high above me, then decided that I didn’t like Cat above me, so I lowered the doll to my own level. I wondered if I should pity the doll for her broken parts, her torn limbs, her half-smile. Surely, she needed mending, didn’t she? My feelings! My feelings! What were they?

Tell her.

I would say it. I would say “Fuck you.”

“F-fuck you,” I muttered, and then in one motion I swept up the poor doll in my arms, and held her tightly, and embraced her, and with a rush in my chest, blurted out, “Oh god I love you, I love you, I love you, with all my heart I love you!” And I wept, and fell to my bed, and held the doll to my bosom as if she were a lover, and lay there, moaning and feeling as if I would die, holding this doll that I had loved as a small child, and still did very much love, as my parents and brothers ate supper downstairs, broke the challah bread, and blessed the Sabbath candles.

2007

Dream

In this thick crowd I can smell body odor mixed with the stench of beer spilled from the game the night before. From what I can tell, this stadium is indoor/outdoor style, maybe semi-covered in parts, but I cannot see beyond a few heads in front of me. We are railroaded further inside. A man shoves me onto an unattended concession stand. "Take that, girl!" he says. The smell of hot dogs sickens me.

At last, the crowd disperses, and people begin to take their seats. People at the back are standing and everyone else is sitting. I sit next to a boy in a leg cast. One of the signatures on the cast reads, "Lisa." A man in front of me snuffs out his cigar. I expect that someone will sing "The Star-Spangled Banner," but this will prove to be no sporting event. The crowd bobs and nods. Suddenly, everyone turns to one corner of the bleachers.

The performer, or speechmaker, turns out to be Cat. She whisks down the aisle toward the field, holding a poster-sized photograph of a woman with very short hair.

Jumping up suddenly, a man cries, "Here, here, dyke!" "Shut up," says another.

Cat steps up onto the podium. She appears tall, but stands only five foot two inches, and she must adjust the microphone to her height. In a booming voice that one would not expect from such a mild-looking woman, she asks, "Do you call *this* a man?" She points to the poster. "Is *this* a man? No, this is a woman. This is the woman who raped my sister! This woman raped my sister!"

Shouts erupt in the crowd. My stomach turns.

Cat holds the photo high. I cannot bear to look. “She raped my sister, then I fell in love with this rapist.

Do you hear me! I loved this woman. I still love her. She raped my sister, but I had sex with her repeatedly and that better make you all horny! I made a rapist cum over and over and beg for more!”

It takes two security guards to hold me down.

Listen to me, listen to me! You're not listening! You don't believe me! I really was enslaved! Holding onto the pillow, the pillow stuffed onto my face, into the pillow, scream, saliva everywhere scream—

A man who resembles an angel, Maria, carries me through the tundra. The sand, thick under his feet, glistens like miniature stars. The man/angel holds me on his shoulders as if I'm a child. I feel limp in his arms. I feel that I must say something, but there is no need for me to speak. At last, the man/angel says, “Julie, I am weary. I cannot carry you much longer.”

1984-2008

Hunger:

From Storms to Quiet Rains

When I was twenty-six and desperate for love, I took an overdose and nearly died. I was in a coma for a day or two. Upon waking, I panicked, not having my eyeglasses near, but someone put them on me, and once I could see, and focus, my eyes fell upon my roommate, Irene, and her husband, Daniel, and Jackson, who had come up from Boston.

“Disappointed, Julie?” said Irene, sarcastically.

“Jackson,” I breathed, “what are you *doing* here?”

“Irene called me,” said Jackson. “We’ve all been worried sick.”

I tried to move, but couldn’t. “I think I’ve wet the bed,” I said. I could barely focus on Irene. “I’m sorry.”

Irene said, “They have you tied in. In case you tried to pull out the IVs.”

A nurse appeared, saying, “So, she’s talking now, is she? Well, well.” She examined the IV drip bag. “Julie, that’s a catheter you’ve got in you. You haven’t wet the bed.”

I met with Dr. Abraham later that day, who was quite sheepish and apologetic. He, after all, was the last person with whom I had spoken before the overdose. My parents came up from Massachusetts and doted on me. I stayed at the hospital for eight weeks, and I wanted to die all the more. I was sent to a work farm, where I shoveled snow for six hours a day. That, certainly, was not the answer.

The hospital wasn’t the answer; love wasn’t there. Medication wasn’t the answer. I even took up smoking. I

smoked religiously for nine years. I remember sitting on my couch in my North Bennington apartment, butts accumulating in the ashtray. Ashes covered the coffee table. I sucked on my cigarettes, feeling the smoke fill my lungs, hoping for something more—a magical taste, a “high,” anything—but all I got was a wheezing in my chest.

“When are you going to quit?” my father asked, over the phone.

“Quit smoking—now!” said my mother, on the other phone.

“Look, Mom, Dad, I gotta go.”

My father said, “You are sacrificing your health, for what?”

“Quit smoking—now!”

“Look, I gotta go.”

My father said, “Julie, what is it that you really *want* out of life? To waste it on cigarettes?”

“I said, I gotta go. Bye.”

My parents took me to a quack vitamin doctor next. I was twenty-seven years old. My parents had great faith in this doctor, and drove me all the way from Vermont to New Jersey to see him. The tests consisted of a hair sample, which I sent ahead of time (I would *never* sacrifice any of my hair now!) and an examination of my hands and feet. When my parents came into the doctor’s office to hear his assessment of me, he could hardly contain his giggles. “Julie,” he said, “has *very* cute toes.” The doctor had no genuine answers for me.

I believe most people are on a quest, searching for something. Most have no clue not only what it is they need, but they are unaware that they need anything. It is like watching a blindfolded man sort through the shelf of

bestsellers at a bookstore. He doesn't know one book from the other, and madly fingers the covers, searching for clues, but it is impossible to figure out authors and titles.

After all, what blindfolded man can make use of a book? As a child, I had no picture in my head of what it meant to be close to another person, because closeness in my family was nonexistent. I didn't think closeness among humans was possible or appropriate.

Parents existed for the purpose of teaching and providing. All of the children outside the family teased me; that was the status quo. My brothers were busy being baby brothers. My role in all this was survival. Closeness with another would be a luxury I figured I'd never attain and didn't deserve to have. Most likely intimacy wasn't even in existence between people. Why did I even think of it? How did it come into my head? Why did I long for it so?

Around the time I turned thirty-two, I found my way into a stable relationship. Joe and I were rocky people who found solid ground and a place to take root together, and over the years, we grew. We went to concerts, had coffee, and went to movies, but mostly, we hung out. And what I had found, then, was love, but the Evil undercurrent of hunger in me was still there. I tried to beat it down, to smash it with two-by-fours, with sledgehammers, finally by throwing my whole body and mind down upon the undercurrent, but it would not quit. In my late thirties, I became quite ill. I became psychotic. My weight dropped to eighty-one pounds. You could see my ribs through my shirt, my bones through my face. My armpits were so concave that I had difficulty applying deodorant. I didn't menstruate. I

developed osteoporosis. I believed that my fat was to blame for the rift between love and myself. And Joe felt powerless to help me. Sometimes, he held me. Often, we sat in the van in silence, watching the snow build up on the windshield.

I remember one of the clay pieces I attempted in an art therapy group during that dark year. It was a tiny coil pot, planned to be a coffee mug. "It will hold half a cup of coffee," I explained to the therapist.

He was a kind man, who dutifully brought me the necessary tools to blend together the coils so that the pot would not leak. "Keep the clay moist," he reminded me.

But I failed to wet the clay enough. When I tried to bend the coils, they cracked along the sides, and broke, and the coils would not mesh together to form a proper seal. I tried to fill the cracks with slip, but that didn't help. I remember my hands became as dry and cracked as the clay, and after a while, the pot didn't fit together right anymore. The handle broke off, and as a mug, it leaked.

It is fair to say that it took me fifty years to figure out that I had in fact been craving something. I spent the first forty years of my life searching for someone I couldn't put a face to, something I couldn't name, a magic word never uttered, a God. My search for love was the undercurrent of my life.

Even now, after much time has passed and the cravings have subdued considerably, my hunger still tricks me. Sometimes, I spend too much money, when what I really want and need is love. I recall the urgency with which I repeatedly refreshed my computer screen, to see if I'd won some meaningless object on eBay, and then, sighing, clicked on "Pay Now", knowing my needs

would never be fulfilled by yet another material possession.

A reader might assume that I am less ill now that much time has passed. A reader may also assume that because I have such grand perspective on my quest, I must have moved somehow away from all this trouble, and this is true. I am no longer the desperate seeker of love that I once was. The desperation began to leave me when I turned forty, and has been continually diminishing over the years. At this point I can say that the desperation is nearly eradicated. I no longer seek love from my parents. My father has passed away, and my mother has never had the will or the ability to quench the thirst I felt, the thirst that, due to my own mental defect, had seeped into my adult life. She calls, now and then, but I put her on speakerphone and set the phone down on a table or slip it into my shirt pocket.

The abyss has since been nearly plugged, not due to any action of mine, or any action of any doctor, medication, or therapy. It was a matter of chance. I am not the great achiever who overcame adversity. I didn't achieve anything—I just got lucky. The long, wild search for love got called off, the headlamps switched off; the roaring ended and only a sweet darkness remained. I have learned to accept the silence. Compared to the maniacal pursuit I had endured, it is a peaceful, lonely, and more temperate way of life.

I see my problems as threefold. First of all, there is the eating disorder, which has never left me. It has improved considerably, but I carry around ghosts of it that will affect my body for the rest of my life. I developed osteoporosis, which is irreversible, but for some reason

seems to have improved. My eating and weight are still an issue.

The second problem is my sense of being Evil, and the psychotic elements that accompany my belief that I am marked, of which I am completely convinced, even as I write the word “psychotic,” which means perception of something that isn’t real.

The third problem has to do with the consequences of the above. For who would not, if they had problems with Evil and eating, have trouble also with mood fluctuations? This problem tends to send me jerking around, the way I do when I board a bus, and, while I am still standing, the bus stops suddenly, then starts again, and I am jerked around so violently that even my bladder mechanism is vulnerable.

As I write this, I realize that I am still ill, but something must have changed, enabling me not only to write these words, but to convey something to the reader that he or she can identify with and understand, not some gibberish about Evil Beings that only I can truly feel. Not only that, but I am a reasonable person, and I am happy. The quests for love, for true parents, and for God, which perhaps constitutes a single life quest, with individual variations, are common to all of us, while the mutation of mine was caused by some defect of the brain that scientists are only beginning to explore. I am older now, and my drive to live fully has simplified over the years. Storms have become quiet rains; the sun has peeked through the sweetness of new leaves, and I can rest, now and then.

1983

**A Forgotten Line:
The Bath**

The head psychiatric nurse, Hilda, came back into my hospital room when I was alone, saying, “I expect you to take a shower. You have your menses.” She tap-tapped back into the hall, and barked, “Where are my charts? Laurie, where are the charts?”

Damn stain. Must have started last night. Shit, I forgot.

Hilda appeared in the doorway again, followed by her henchwomen, Laurie and another one. The three of them drew closer. “You’re stinking up the whole state of Vermont. Shower, or tub bath, which will it be, Julie?” Hilda demanded.

Shower. Tub bath. Tub bath. Shower. No. I shook my head. They towered over me. My breath quickened.

“Which will it be?” I backed away.

“Well, then, it has been decided. Run the tub, Laurie.” The two nurses scampered off.

“Now, Julie, we’re going to have a little talk. And I get to do all the talking. Have you heard the expression, ‘The silent waters are the deepest’?” I shook my head. “Well, you’d better start thinking about it.” Hilda stared at me. Creases under her green-hazel eyes were filled with turquoise eye shadow; in fact, she was heavily made-up around the eyes. Perhaps she’d been freckled as a child and those freckles had faded. I guessed her age at forty-five.

Hilda sat on the bed. She was so close to me that I could smell her breath. “Have you had a shower or bath

in the past week?" she asked. I hadn't. "In the past two, three weeks?" Again, I shook my head. "Why?"

Why? Neglecting personal hygiene—why?"

The bath was ready, but I did not intend to use it.

"Go on." I didn't budge.

"Go on. We'll be waiting right outside." I refused.

"Ms. Greene, proceed to the bath! Now!" After a minute, Hilda said, "Okay, Patsy and Laurie, I'm not wasting my time waiting for this patient. Let's get her into the tub."

With one nurse on each side and Hilda barking orders there was little I could do, though I struggled at first. Their arms locked into mine, they dragged me from the bed, white sheets trailing behind us, while I dug my bare heels into the floor, though doing so did little to stop the progression toward the bath. I screamed. Of course I screamed. I screamed for all the children in the world that had ever been forced into the bath. I screamed for all the patients that had ever been forced to do anything against their will. I screamed for my fellow Jew, whose *kipah* fell off his head as he was escaping the Nazis, yet he turned to pick it up—he was shot dead. I screamed for myself, for my future, which would unlock and reveal time after time the act of force, the act of entrapment, the act of belittlement, the act of shaming. In the name of saving my life I screamed, as Patsy and Laurie, under orders from Hilda, ripped my bedclothes off of me, stripped me completely, pushed me into the tub, and with white hospital washcloths, washed me, while my menstrual blood flowed into the bath and mixed with the splashing bathwater and tears and mucus and spittle, bodily fluids all splashing together, swirling in this great sea of force, they washed me, and I wept.

1984

The Farm

You tried suicide; this is your punishment. Six months labor at the farm in the Berkshires, six months of isolation in this place of beauty. Maple syrup laps at your feet. You tried suicide; this is your punishment.

You are alone here in the presence of others. It is the place of Babel. You speak to the others, try to reach out; all you receive are grunts in return. The guests are medicated. You are medicated. The nurse brings each guest his own medication in little envelopes at each meal, his own private words, to swallow alive. This is your punishment; this is Hell.

You disappointed your parents, and so they sent you here. They were delighted with this work farm. They talked to the director in hushed words behind the door. You will stay, they told you. This is the answer. This is the Miracle Cure. Arbeit Macht Frei.

You remove your boots to find frostbitten toes. You don't dare tell your supervisor. Your back aches from shoveling snow six hours a day. The others have been shoveling cow dung. You tried suicide; this is your punishment.

One man, though, is not like the others. He doesn't grunt. He speaks, in your language. He is twenty-five, one year younger than you. He is handsome and talented. His artwork fills the walls of his room, and spills into the hallway like a bathtub overflowing. You seek him out to fill the hunger of this place. He hands you a paintbrush and a tube of crimson Grumbacher paint. He pours you a steamy cup. And another cup.

But your coffee is uncovered. House-parents put restrictions on both of you. Close friendships are discouraged here. Don't let them talk, ehrenmanner, they'll plan a riot. They send him to a halfway house.

You feel that you will die of loneliness.

You tried suicide. Now, contact with the outside world is further limited. The only telephone is a pay phone for which you have no money. You call your parents collect. You beg them to send you to a hospital.

The farm pronounces you well one day, releases you to the world. What good has it done to be shut up on this farm, only to be scattered to the wolves? Now, you cannot bear the brightness of it, the reality of freedom: A car. Roommates. Electric bills. For the farm, in all its cruelty, sheltered you from the world. The farm, like the cruelest state hospitals, became a routine, as all prisons become. You learned every loophole, every weakness in the system, every "way out." And now, you have nothing to fight against. You are like the kid with the bag of Halloween candy who ate too much. You don't know what to do with this freedom that now has turned against you.

You tried suicide; this is your punishment.

1986

**Pro Re Nata:
Emergence**

“And why are you here?” the nurse asked me, scribbling on his forms.

Why was I there? I had been sent to Met State by the staff at the hospital in Concord because I had been listening to thoughts in my head that were negative and intrusive. Metropolitan State Hospital, which has since closed down, was located in Waltham, Massachusetts, on Concord Avenue, within walking distance of the famous McLean Hospital, which was on Mill Street. In Concord, the hospital was full of glass objects, and I hadn’t yet learned to do tricks in my head to get rid of bad thoughts. I needed a “locked unit,” where there was no glass: Met State.

“Why are you here?” the nurse repeated.

“I was sent here,” I replied. “From Wheeler III.”

“It says here you live in Vermont.”

“No. I recently moved from Vermont. To Lexington.

With my *parents*.” I had moved from the apartment I had shared with Irene, and again had fled to what I had thought would be safety, in Massachusetts.

“And you’re twenty-eight years old. Let’s see...born where?”

“Philadelphia.”

“I see.”

I considered bolting out of there while the poor man fussed with his mass of multicolored paperwork, then reconsidered. It would only get me into further trouble. A rotating fan whirred in the corner. Judging by the solid concrete floor, I guessed that we were in the hospital

basement, the same floor to which I had been delivered by ambulance not long ago. The nurse rolled back his shirtsleeves. He had a small unidentifiable tattoo on his left arm that continued up his bicep. He wrote my name on the bottom of the form, then handed me the pen. “I advise you to sign this,” he said, “otherwise you’ll be committed.”

He had spelled my name wrong. I didn’t dare protest. I took the pen from him. I signed my name.

Metropolitan State Hospital is the actual name of the hospital. It is not a pseudonym. The three days I spent at Met State translated into a sixty-two-page document of which I still have a copy, in a white three-ring binder. It isn’t very good writing; none of my writing was very good back then, but I think of it now as a historical record: I was there. Writing kept me sane in the insane, cruel world of the state hospital.

When my mother came to visit, she was concerned that there was no means to get any exercise at the hospital. Exercise? This was survival. This was leaving your room in the morning wondering if all your belongings would still be there when you returned. This was deciding between walking the grounds and risking being raped or staying inside and not seeing daylight for months on end. This was getting beaten up for the fourth time. I had heard of the many cruelties of this place years before. Already, I felt I could trust no one; I was like an animal preyed upon, always on guard; even in my sleep I was vigilant. Imagine being that fearful for a month, a year, a decade. Exercise? Yes, Mother, I recorded exactly what I had seen. Writing was more than therapy.

6:15a.m., and I wanted to smoke. Fans blew in the hallway just outside the day room, where five or six patients had already gathered. I stepped inside. Staff members, called “mental health workers,” stood at the entranceways with clipboards and pens. Each had a set of keys dangling from his belt, and an ID badge. I removed a cigarette from my purse, and fished for a lighter. I found none.

“Why you shake like dat? You wanna light? Here, have a light. Why you shake? We take you lightah. You wanna light? Come on, girl. Hurry up.”

It took me a moment to understand. My lighter had been confiscated along with anything sharp, flammable, poisonous, breakable, or otherwise used to harm myself or another person. All had been removed from my belongings during the night. I hadn’t been body-searched, but I didn’t put it past them to do so.

Rae flicked a lighter at me. “You wanna light?”

“Sure.” I held out my cigarette, and inhaled. “I have a tremor,” I explained, “from my medications.” But Rae was gone, lighting another patient’s cigarette. The staff had the sacred tool of fire: power. We had none.

I *had* to write this down.

When I was finished with my cigarette, Rae led me into another day room where about half a dozen other patients, all male, were seated in rickety metal folding chairs, smoking and watching TV. The room was large, uncarpeted, and barren except for the chairs and the TV, suspended up high on the wall. Smoke had already thickened. Some patients looked at me and grumbled; some didn’t turn their heads. The white noise of fans necessitated that the TV be turned to an intolerable volume, and I wondered how the rest of the patients

could sleep through it all. A solemn procession flashed on the TV screen. Patients watched, some curious, some awed, some bored, as horses in full attire proudly carried smartly dressed noblemen down a London street. In front of me, a worker stood, one hand on his hip, watching intently, saying, “Uh huh, uh huh,” to no one in particular. Some of the patients rocked in their chairs; some chairs rocked whether the patients wanted them to or not. The air was burning with Chesterfields, Camels, Kools, and my Marlboro 100’s. Trumpets began a triumphant fanfare on the TV. This was no funeral, the stuffy, British-accented announcer declared. Prince Andrew was getting married!

1997

Walking the Line

Dr. F is going around the room asking us each how our meds are going, and when it comes my turn I'm going to spit in her face. She's the big shot of McLean. This isn't public stuff and it's none of anyone's business how my meds are going. She gestures with pointy red nails. This one says the meds are making him incontinent. He even shuffles in his seat for effect, and is wearing sweat pants. Lovely. That other one says he's been drinking again. Like hell I want to hear that. I watch Dr. F's perfectly red lipsticked mouth make shapes like O's and fake smiles and bubbles like they come from a bubble-pipe.

But it doesn't begin here. It begins at the beginning of time, when there was The Thing and there was randomness, just open space and The Thing. The Thing was Evil. The Thing needed a home, and It found Me, so I became Evil. That was long before meds and long before The Act of Time Itself became Evil.

That is what I tried to explain to the doctors but they didn't believe me. They didn't believe in The Thing's existence so they don't believe in my existence. I am nothing to them, a nobody. I could die and they wouldn't notice. I would suffer and they wouldn't care. The nurses will throw shit at me. The Thing said they would. The Thing gave me a vision of nurses with shit on their uniforms coming after me.

I tried to explain this a while back to the doctor on the Unit, but he cut me off mid-sentence, murmuring, "You've got a problem with anger," and then he walked off somewhere.

“Like what?” I haven’t been paying proper attention to Dr. F.

“When do you see Dr. Mitchell?”

“I don’t want to tell you.” The Thing doesn’t want me to tell her. “My heart hurts and so do my legs.” “Maybe you should eat something.” My stomach is filled with blue cotton. “Okay, next patient.”

1981

**At the Crossroads:
Welfare Scum**

Contemporary Issues group at Crossroads Day Treatment consisted of watching a videotaped portion of The Phil Donahue Show. Donahue and his four guests were discussing the blame and shame society placed upon people who received Welfare benefits. Three of the guests were Welfare recipients and one was a social worker. At the end of the segment, Rick, who was running the group, switched off the TV, and said to the seven of us who were in the group, "So, what does everyone think?"

"I think it sucks!" said Tim D from the corner of the room. He began to laugh loudly. "Let's watch the

Sox game instead! Go Boston!" "Shut up, Tim," said Irene.

There was silence in the room. Then a shy looking young woman raised her hand. "I'm ashamed that I'm on Welfare. Embarrassed."

"If you can't lick 'em, join 'em," someone said.

"Strike three, group's over!"

"Shut up!"

"Yeah, shut up!"

"Jenny, can you say that again? About being embarrassed? Can you say more?"

Jenny, the shy girl, shook her head. Her eyes were full of tears.

"How many people here are on Welfare?" Hands went up slowly. Someone burped. More hands went up, except mine.

"It's a sin," said a young man sitting up front.

“It’s no sin,” said Tim. “It says in the Bible that God forgives us for—”

“For what, Tim, for being a leach off of other people? Come off it! ‘Bout time you quit that Bible stuff,” said Leslie.

“I want a cigarette.”

“Here, have a fucking cigarette. It’s menthol.”

“I don’t want your fucking cigarette.”

Rick said, “What do you think, Irene?”

“I wish I was working.”

“June?”

“I’m ashamed I’m not working. My kids are ashamed of me.”

“Julie?”

“I—” It was my turn to feel ashamed. I was twenty-three years old, and I had never been on any kind of government assistance, not even unemployment benefits. Only once had I ever had to worry about where the next dime was coming from, and it came soon enough. *I had never lived by the sweat of my brow* for any reasonable period of time. I had a bank account, and right now that bank account was shaming me. Blood rushed to my face. They would catch me in a lie no matter what I said. I wanted so much to be like them, and right now, I wasn’t doing a very good job of it.

“It was a little embarrassing to need government assistance to pay for college,” I said weakly. Then I realized it was the opposite of the truth, a flat-out lie.

“You’re very lucky,” said Leslie, “to go to college. I would have liked to go to college, if I’d had the chance.”

“Me too.”

“Yeah.”

I said, “It’s...it’s...” I couldn’t stop the sweating. My body was on overdrive. I was embarrassed that I’d had it so easy, never having developed the calluses one gets from a hard day’s work, the gasp of relief upon receipt of one’s paycheck, the celebration of the weekend. I was denied that privilege. Instead, I was handed other privileges, privileges that embarrassed and shamed me, now more than ever.

“What are you doing here, then,” asked Leslie, “if you’re so smart? What’s your problem? Where were you at lunch? Why won’t you talk?”

I looked at Rick, who said, “Julie doesn’t have to tell us anything on her first day. She’ll have plenty of opportunity, though, in the next group. Group Therapy.”

1983

**A Forgotten Line:
The Lord's Prayer**

The nurse Hilda stomped into my hospital room later on with a paper bag, saying, "Your roommate Irene brought some clothes. I hear the two of you share an apartment in North Bennington. We won't let her visit unless you talk to us." Hilda dropped the bag onto my bed. She put her hands on her hips, and stared at me. "You don't want her visiting, do you? I can tell. Something's going on with her. She looked like she was going to barge in here and usurp you. I don't miss much, you know. Well," she said, "you'd better get dressed. Clean clothes." She started to stomp off, then turned back. "Second shift is coming on. Try to talk to them." For some reason, I didn't hate her anymore.

I emptied the bag of clothes onto my bed. Irene had chosen well. There was an envelope at the bottom of the bag, which I opened, to find a letter enclosed:

Dear Julie,

You're not a very good friend because you didn't share with me how badly you were feeling. I'm so lonely here in the apartment that if you don't come home soon I'm going to have a nervous breakdown.

Irene

Damn her! Damn Irene and damn this whole situation! Damn Scully and Hilda and my parents and the whole world and God, too! Yes, this was all God's fault. God had damned me. God had shamed me. I had brought shame upon myself in God's sight. I was a sinner! Oh

dear God I was a very bad sinner, the worst kind, the kind that would not be forgiven until all kinds of tortures were put upon me, tortures I would have to endure, torture by fire, torture by sword, by water, by bitter herb, by wind, by the hand of God, and by God's word! I knew I had to pray.

I got down on my knees on the floor by the bed. The floor was cold, and my knees bare, but that was better, I knew, for prayer. It was good to suffer! I needed to suffer more, even more than I already had. I clenched my hands together, and knowing that I would certainly go to Hell, as a Jew saying a Christian prayer, I did so anyway. I began the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father, who art in Heaven—I wiped a tear from my eye—Our Father, who art—what good is He in Heaven when I need Him in this hospital room, right here, right now? I needed to pray harder. Our Father, who art in Heaven and in this hospital, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done—God, I need You right here right now in this hospital, kneeling here right on this floor—on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, which means a sin, as we forgive those that trespass against us. Give us now...give us our...I can't recall, can I? Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done! Done! Done!

I began to weep, kneeling by the bed, dressed in only a johnny, surrounded by sheets and hospital bed blankets and a couple of hospital pillows. I hugged one of the pillows close to myself while I cried, wiping my nose and eyes with the sheets. I needed to talk to a nurse.

I dragged myself to my feet, pulling one of the blankets around me for warmth, and slipped on the blue

hospital slipper socks the nurses had left for me. Though my body may have been clean, I felt filthy, contaminated. I stopped at the doorway and peeked into the hall. An elderly man sat strapped into a chair in the hallway, drooling. An open area lay beyond the hallway. A TV flashed in what looked like a day room. To the right were a table and chairs. I slowly made my way through the day room toward the nurses' station.

Only one nurse sat at the desk; otherwise the room was empty. The TV was turned down. I saw on her ID badge that her name was Lena. She caught my eye and held contact. "Julie, how can I help?"

I took a deep breath, and said, "I forgot something."

"What did you forget?"

I tried to say, "The words to the Lord's Prayer," but I could say no more. I turned and shuffled back to my room.

1986

Goodbye, Irene

I had a writing mentor named Paul. He visited me daily at my apartment in North Bennington, Vermont. I was living alone at the time. I made coffee for Paul when he came. He was the only human contact I had during the day, except for those I saw when I went to the post office, or my frequent appointments with Dr. C, my psychiatrist in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, an hour's drive away.

Irene had long since moved out. She and Daniel had married and moved in with his mother, who lived down the street. They had broken the news to me of their move about three weeks prior to their departure, very apologetically. Irene had set up the table with the wine glasses she had given me as a gift. Why she had given them to me I could only speculate. She filled the glasses full of wine for herself and Daniel, and water for me, for I could not drink alcohol because of my medications.

"We're sorry," she said softly. "I hope you don't get all worked up over this." She glanced at Daniel nervously.

"See," Daniel explained, "we have to save money. On rent and everything." He was a quiet, bony man with a balding head and boyish look.

"Daniel and me, we'll always be your friends, won't we, Daniel?" Irene said.

Inside, my heart was jumping. Freedom! At last! But I tried to keep the corners of my mouth from turning upward, and I said, "I understand. Of course I do. You're just down the street."

Paul, my mentor, knew little of Irene, except that we had lived together and that she was some sort of “best friend” that he had never met. He knew none of my friends, what few I had left. I spent my days smoking, drinking coffee, and writing. I wrote mostly poetry, bad poetry, but Paul saw something in it. He let himself in when he came. There was no need to knock, and no need for me to keep the door locked in this rural area, or so I thought.

“I don’t have much time today,” he said one day in June when he came.

I was disappointed, but said, “I have coffee for you,” as I did every day. I set his cup and my cup on my coffee table. It was a new table that I had acquired after he had repeatedly complained about the old one.

“Wanna see my poems?”

“Sure,” he said.

I nodded toward the papers on the coffee table. “Read,” I said.

Change of Shift

slowly

the next ones come in

i watch

as summer turns

to fall

“This is about the hospital, Julie, isn’t it?” Paul asked. I nodded. “But not really, Julie. Not *just* the hospital. It’s about transition. Mind if I read it aloud?”

“Fine with me.”

Paul had been an actor, and was now a playwright. His clear, deep voice illuminated the room. A silence followed. “I like that,” he said at last. “It’s like Haiku. Only seven syllables in the first stanza, eight in the second, and three in the title. There are eighteen altogether. It works. Let’s see the second poem!”

This Sharp Edge

i dive
fluid-knowing sharp as
 this moment
 and pierce-bubble
slice-dusts this bare want-mindful
 membrane

ever-trickling quiver and flowing steady
these floor-circles drip
 life-silence
 within sound

within ever say
knowing am go i

“Julie, this is about *suicide*,” Paul said. “Honestly!” He turned to face me, but I looked down at my jeans. “This isn’t the first poem you’ve written about suicide, Julie.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I can’t keep coming here if you’re going to write poetry about suicide. Understand? I can’t take it anymore.”

“Look, Paul, it’s just a *poem*, for god sakes! And it means more than just—”

“It’s too stressful for me, coming here, not knowing if you’re alive or dead.” “Huh? I’m *alive*, Paul!”

“Well, I don’t know that when I come here. Listen: I knock on the door. Say you’re still in bed. It’s eleven a.m. and you’re still in bed! So I come up the stairs not knowing what to expect. Alive or dead. You know how I feel, coming up those stairs?”

“Paul, don’t be ridiculous!”

“I’ve talked it over with my wife. This stress is really affecting me in a bad way. I can’t come over anymore. Not every day. Not anymore.”

“Huh?”

“Just what I said, Julie.”

I set my coffee down, my hand shaking worse than it ever did from my medication. “Paul, your visits are the high point of my day.”

Paul put his hand on my knee momentarily. “You should learn to be independent, Julie.”

And with that, Paul stood. He was six and a half feet tall, and I felt his height then more than ever. He did not finish his coffee. He hadn’t even removed his hat. After he left, I wept.

Paul’s visits didn’t stop completely. He came, periodically, but he was curt with me, not the Paul I had known. Every morning at eleven a.m., I filled the coffeemaker with cold water, measured enough Chock Full ‘o Nuts for two people, and started the machine, never knowing if he would show. I generally drank the coffee myself.

“I’m leaving,” I said to Irene one day, over the phone. “I’m moving in with my parents. I can get better psychiatric care in the Boston area. Here, for god’s sakes,

there are only three psychiatrists left in the whole county. I have to drive an hour to see mine in

Massachusetts, and I'm losing faith in him, Irene."

"I think he's a quack."

"Who is prescribing for the Clinic, now that Scully is dead?"

"Levi, I think."

"Is that who you get your drugs from?"

"That's none of your business," she snapped. "What about this Paul person, who you're having an affair with? Did you break it off with him?"

"Irene, we weren't having an affair."

"Yeah, sure. He came *every day*, Julie. People talk."

"Irene, he doesn't come anymore."

"What?"

"Just what I said. He doesn't come. I'm heartbroken. I can't believe it. He was so nice to me, and then—bam! He doesn't come. Irene, I'm so *lonely* now. I just want to leave. There is nothing left for me in Vermont. Nothing whatsoever keeping me here. That's why I'm going to Massachusetts."

"Nothing, huh?" Suddenly, I realized the full meaning of what I had said. "*Nothing?*"

"Uh, anyway, Dr. C is setting me up with a psychiatrist in Boston, a *good* one, and there are plenty to choose from, lots of facilities and programs," I said.

"Like Crossroads Day Treatment," Irene snarled. "Julie, do you think you'll ever go back *there*? Is that what you want to do with your life? Go to Crossroads?"

"Waste your life in some *program*?" "Look, I gotta go," I said.

"Julie, when can I visit?" Irene asked. "To say goodbye? How about Friday?"

“Irene, that’s the day Paul is coming to say goodbye. Can we make it a different day?”

“A different day, huh? A *different* day? Because *Paul* is coming, huh?”

“Irene, I—”

“I’ll call you back later in the week.”

But Irene didn’t call, and though I tried calling her, she didn’t pick up her telephone, not that I wanted her to. I moved back to Massachusetts, again, and after I moved, she neither wrote nor called, and I never heard from her again. She probably has other friends now, other concerns, and if she saw me today, I wouldn’t be particularly happy to see her, nor would she be happy to see me. Sometimes, I wonder if Irene thinks of me, even now, but I doubt it. She appears frequently, in my dreams, in my thoughts, and in my writing. I have enough, I think, to remember.

1997

Walking the Line

The Thing gave me Evil clouds that I couldn't get away from. Nurses made faces at me, and made me eat rotten food. I ran from them and tried to hide from them. I pleaded with a doctor, "Help me with The Thing!" and he sneered, "What thing?" and turned his back on me.

1986

Pro Re Nata:

“Lisa”

Breakfast at Metropolitan State Hospital, where I was incarcerated.

I turned to Rae. “Get your tray,” she said. She patted her keys with an air of authority. “He who holds the keys has all the power,” Jackson, from Crossroads Day Treatment had once told me, five years ago, when I was there. Now, I realized it was true: the person with the keys was the only one who could have gotten us out of that place.

The cafeteria looked and smelled much like a school cafeteria. We had no choices on the menu; we took what was given us. That day, the selection was an omelet that could barely be cut with a knife. A *plastic* knife, of course. The staff led us back through a maze of concrete hallways, one worker on either end of the line, to the sweltering, drab day rooms of R-3.

Lunch at Met State.

We imagined sandwiches with tomatoes, sprouts, and cheese, served on homemade bread. We had a nice laugh. Then we became silent again, seeing the slime on our trays. The haves and the have-nots.

And we ate. Or tried to. Ground-up summer squash was fit for a nursing home, and dry fish sticks were better thrown in the trash.

Later, I was tired, so I asked if I could take a nap. I knew that the patients were not allowed to spend time in their rooms during the day at all, so I wasn't sure what kind of arrangements the staff would make for me, whether they would make an exception for me, seeing

that I had come to the hospital so late the night before. Dutifully the “mental health worker” led me down to the very end of the sweaty corridor to a small room. “You can sleep here,” he said with a grin.

I peeked inside. A single bed stood in the center of the room, curved slightly into a sitting position. On either side were leather straps for ankles and wrists, “restraints,” they were called. The bed resembled an electric chair. I backed away. “Sleep...in that?” I asked.

The worker grinned at me. I could count his teeth.

“Uh, no thanks,” I said.

I returned to the day room, where others were catching up on sleep. Many patients, sedated from their medication, were overcome with sleepiness all day long. Some slept seated, nodding off with their heads slumped over onto their shoulders. Four patients had each lined up a pair of metal chairs, and curled up on the two, their feet dangling off the edge. The fellow I ate lunch with snored loudly, his shirttails hanging nearly to the floor. Cigarettes had fallen out of his shirt pocket. On the wall, the TV blared “General Hospital,” and then, “Phil Donohue.”

Around the time I was admitted to Met State, I rarely showered. My reasons for not showering varied from laziness to fear to lack of adequate hot water and heat in my apartment. Three years previously, in the hospital in Vermont, I had been forced into the tub, and there had been a time more recently that I didn’t shower for five months. But here at Met State, I didn’t argue. In the sixty-two page document, I recorded what the admitting nurse had written, for I had watched him write, “*Neat, clean, quiet, and cooperative.*” The fact was, I hadn’t showered for three weeks. This hiatus came to an end

when, at Met State, we were forced to take showers daily.

I remember my first shower in that place. I had just lit a cigarette when I heard a voice calling out in the hall: "Shower time! Female showers!" I chose to ignore the announcement and enjoy my cigarette. In no time, a worker grabbed my arm, hoisted me up, and rushed me to the line of women patients waiting to go into the showers. Because our unit was called R-3, these were the R-3 showers. Men and women shared the same shower room, using it in shifts. I was handed a bleached white towel and hotel-sized bar of soap. On it was the word, "Lisa." The woman ahead of me shuffled nervously. I could see beads of sweat accumulated on the back of her neck beside the ruffles of her blouse.

Finally, the line moved. We were led down narrow winding corridors with insulated and uninsulated pipes that jutted out from the walls and ceiling. The floor was dirtier here. At last we arrived at the shower room.

The showers appeared much like those I've seen in films of prison showers, with nothing but skimpy curtains between shower stalls. The worker flipped a switch and the water came on in all the stalls at once. Clearly, there would be no way to adjust the water temperature. There were no front curtains.

Without being asked, patients lined up each in front of a stall and silently undressed. Some peered at me curiously, which at that moment I didn't mind. Without protest, we gingerly entered the showers. The wetness shocked me the way diving into a pool, no matter the water temperature, suddenly overwhelms my body with its fullness. The water was only lukewarm. I hesitated, then washed.

Workers stood outside the stalls and watched patients bathe, one worker for every two or three patients. Rae, the mental health worker “supervising” my showering, screamed at the girl next to me, “Hurry up, you’re so slow!” I heard repeated yelling down the hall. When I was done washing, Rae poured an entire bottle of shampoo onto my head, saying, “Wash your hair, wash your hair, now, Julie!”

1982

Supper

“You’re not having anything, Julie?”

“Naw, I’m not hungry.”

“I could eat a ten-course meal about now after that Group Therapy today. I’ll have a jumbo burger, please.” Jackson handed his menu to the waiter. “And fries and a Coke. You don’t want even a Coke, Julie?”

“I’ll have a Tab, I suppose. Yeah, a Tab, please.”

“This is on me, so don’t be shy. Order what you want, okay?”

“Really, Jackson, *I’m not hungry.*”

“Okay, *okay.* I just thought—”

“Relax,” I said, taking off my coat. “How have you been feeling, besides the obvious?”

“Besides being totally shot to hell by the Imiprimine? That’s a good question. Tell me something, Julie: What is your real opinion of the therapists at Crossroads? Specifically, Rick?”

“In what context?” I checked my watch. Six-thirty.

“I mean, do you think he’s, you know, a good therapist?”

“Nothing but the best, Jackson. He really knows how to confront people and get at the root of people’s problems. Like with June’s thing with her mother. It’s interesting the way he brings out the issues.”

“And?”

“I think he’s a good therapist, that’s all.”

“For you, too? Does he bring out *your* issues?”

“Let’s not get personal. He’s not my administrator. Diana is.”

“I think—Julie, you’re going to think I’m weird for saying this, but—Julie, I think Rick is...so *cute*.”

“Oh, he’s definitely a doll, Jackson. And I don’t think you’re weird for saying that. He’s incredibly cute.” I thanked the waiter for our drinks.

“I...I like his moustache.” Jackson giggled nervously.

“Yes, he’s cute, all right.”

Jackson said, “I like his eyes.”

“Brown eyes. He’s Greek or something like that.

What are you getting at, anyway?

“Sometimes I’d like to – well, never mind.” “Jackson, are you trying to tell me something?”

“Sort of. Sort of. I don’t mean Rick. I mean...you’re a very understanding person, Julie. I *trust* you. You’re a good *listener*. You and Irene. You and Irene are always together, and both of you are so *compassionate*, and good for each other. I trust you. I want to tell you something, but I don’t want you to tell anyone. It’s not just Rick.”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

“I think Rick is really adorable,” said Jackson.

“Jackson, are you...are you attracted to him?”

“Shh.”

“Here comes your burger. It’s a big one, Jackson.”

The waiter scooted off quickly. “Jackson, are you *gay*?”

“Whoa, this burger’s hot! Not exactly gay, Julie. You should have ordered another Tab while he was here. You must be thirsty. You drank the whole thing down.”

I lowered my voice. “Still in the closet?”

“I’m bi.”

I whispered, “Jackson, I think I am, too. Not sure. Don’t...don’t tell Irene. *Please*.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Jackson took in some quick, nervous breaths.

“How long have you known?”

“All my life, Julie.”

“Me too. Since I was a kid.” I stirred my Tab with my straw.

“I go to bars and shit.”

“I don’t,” I said. “I’ve sort of sworn off sex and booze right now.”

“I’m not supposed to be drinking because of the meds.”

I leaned forward. “I won’t tell anyone about you, and you don’t tell anyone about me. Deal, Jackson?” “We won’t tell anyone at Crossroads.” “I won’t tell Irene,” I said.

“She’s cute,” he said.

“Jackson, don’t tell me you have a crush on her or whatever.”

“I do. I want to ask her out.”

“You’re playing with fire. Jackson, eat that burger before it gets cold.”

“Okay, deal. You really think she’s trouble?”

“Just *don’t*. You don’t know who you’re dealing with. I don’t know who I’m dealing with.”

“She’s *your* friend.”

“I’ll be honest: I think she’s awesome,” I said. “You couldn’t ask for more in a friend. She even loves my dog. His name is Hoofy, you know. I’m going to ask her if she wants to move in with me when I go back to Vermont.”

“And?”

“And...I just don’t know. Something about her,” I breathed.

“I could easily fall for her.”

“Shut up, Jackson. I won’t tell her. Don’t ask her out, okay?”

“You’ll be jealous?”

“It’s not like that,” I snapped.

“Then what?” Jackson nibbled at his burger. “Mmm, This is *good*, Julie.”

“We’re making a deal. You don’t tell. I don’t tell.

Not a word to Irene. My lips are sealed. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Now, order me another Tab and get eating.”

1997

Walking the Line

Group is almost over.

The Thing made me cry and shake all over, and made the ground shake beneath me. I hollered out loud but no one heard me. I didn't even hear myself because I was screaming into a blue Sani-Guard pillow. They took my rings off when they locked me in the room.

1981

**At the Crossroads:
Group Therapy**

Only certain “high functioning” clients were picked for Group Therapy, and I was one of them. “High functioning” and “low functioning” were dirty words I would later come across many times during my stay at Crossroads Day Treatment, which meant essentially that if you could carry on a reasonable conversation and relate to other people in a reasonable manner, you were “high functioning.” If you couldn’t, you were “low functioning.” It went deeper than that, but on the surface that was how it seemed. The six members of Group Therapy, besides myself, were Irene, June, Leslie, Jackson, and Roy. I knew their names already, so the silly introductions were superfluous.

Suddenly, I felt self-conscious about my weight. Just yesterday evening, my mother, trying to help, had given me a “generous” present. “Open the bag, Julie,” she said, plopping a large shopping bag in front of me.

“Gee, thanks, Mom,” I said.

It was a burnt-orange down jacket. “Look, Julie,” she cried, raising her arms with glee. “Look at the sides. See these hooks? This jacket has an *adjustable waistband!* Perfect for you!” The fillings in her teeth glistened as she shouted—always, always too loudly—and at that moment I could have pulled those fillings, had they been steel, out of her mouth with a giant, allpowerful magnet. But instead, I remained silent, grieving for the mother I never had.

I realized that it was fall, and I wouldn’t need the jacket until winter—no, I would purchase another, I

vowed. I would not wear the one that Mother had given me!

The weather outside this afternoon was cool and crisp, colder than usual for Boston in October, but here in the Crossroads Blue Room, where Group Therapy was always held, the air was pleasantly warm, reminding me of my classrooms at Bennington College, where I'd been a student only months previously. I noted with amusement, and a sense of irony, a blackboard on one wall.

Jackson appeared very nervous.

Leslie was applying hand lotion.

Irene said, "I don't think it's right that Leslie puts on hand lotion during group. It's distracting and she's not really participating, she's putting on lotion and that's not right. It means she's not really paying attention."

June whispered something about a tissue and started fishing for one in her purse.

"Jackson has an issue," said Irene, "and nobody's paying attention."

"I'm listening," said Roy.

"I know Jackson has an issue," said Leslie. "He told me so at lunch."

"Oh Jackson," said Irene. "Look at Jackson. He's shaking. He's got so much anxiety in him. He needs meds real bad. Jackson, take an Ativan, for God's sakes. Look at you."

"Oh, Jackson," murmured June. "Here's a tissue. There. Let it out. Is it your mother again?" She turned to Leslie. "His mother, you know."

"Yes, it's his mother."

Roy stretched. He was wearing a heavy cableknit sweater and jeans. “Jackson, you’ve got to tell her to stop arranging dates for you.”

“Is that what she’s doing, Jackson?”

“Did Jackson tell you that?”

“Oh, Jackson. Let it out.”

Irene said, “She’s not your fucking matchmaker.”

Jackson wailed, “Don’t say ‘fucking’ about my mm-m-mother...”

June said, “Jackson, can you refuse to go on those dates, just cancel?”

“Tell your mother you won’t. Tell her.”

“Yeah, tell her.”

“Oh, Christ.”

“Take an Ativan.”

“I c-c-can’t tell her. She’s my *mother!*”

“Tell her.”

“Blow your nose. Here. Blow.”

“Tell her.”

tell her tell her tell her tell her why don’t they—

“Jackson, sober up.”

“Ask Julie what she thinks. She hasn’t talked.”

“Not a word.”

My eyes were little slits. Paisley patterns thumped behind my eyelids, pissing fuzz in my pupils, tingles in my fingertips, rattles in my toes. The floor rose and fell; the earth itself rose and fell beneath me, and all went gray. I gripped the chair. Martians. I had to get out of there.

“Not a word, Julie.”

“She’ll talk.”

“Say something.”

“I—”

“Let her talk. Don’t interrupt.”

“Julie’s going to say something.” Roy cleared his throat.

I said, “It’s very nice meeting all of you.”

Irene said, “She talked.” Her long, expressive fingernails were painted purple.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

Jackson said, “I need another tissue.”

“Jackson—”

June said, “I only have a napkin from Dunkin Donuts.”

“Yeah, gimme that.”

1997

Walking the Line

“Julie, sit still. Stop rocking, stop muttering. Group is almost over.”

I remember the supermarket. The Thing was after me. I told it to stop. I rode my bicycle there from McLean, trying to make The Thing stop. I tried to make the bicycle speak to me. Another man came and locked his own bike near mine. His helmet and gear were very sophisticated.

“Excuse me, sir, I’m just locking my bike here, at the supermarket. It is a very nice day, yes, it is. My seat is worn, well, you need some air in your tires—good day.”
Tell it to stop. Stop. The Thing is Evil. Evil, tell it to stop

“Tell it to stop.” Hearing myself speak.

“Pardon me?” His voice about as deep as a tire iron.

“Tell it to stop. The Thing.”

“What thing?”

“Never mind.”

He disappears behind the corner, behind a mountain of corn. Corny and horny. People here are cornier and even hornier. All employees wear Kelly green aprons and matching shirts from Hell. The Thing tells me these things, and The Thing is from Hell, too. Apples in bags whisper to me from the bleachers. They giggle and glisten and titter among themselves in their soggy get-ups. Disgusted, I walk inside.

grapefruit pineapple oranges lemons ALL HALF-PRICE

I wander around the store and pray for peace. The bicycle guy is following me poised to clonk me over the

head with his bicycle pump. I'm not afraid of him. I'm afraid of The Thing. A fat lady kisses strawberries. I follow a roll of toilet paper down the aisle. "Miss."

Thrashing a look at him I see a boy in a green apron. "Miss, are you crying? Is there something I can do for you do for you do for you?" No for you no for you no for you.

"Make The Thing stop." I poke a tomato and it vomits its seeds.

"What thing? Please don't put your helmet on those kiwis, we like to keep those clean, Miss. Clean, Miss."

I wonder if I stuck my finger in my ear, if it would come out the other ear. "Make The Thing stop."

"McLean filth."

Wave hello to a few people I don't know. So as not to disturb the limes, I steal over to the Shop the World aisle with nonfat Mexican refried what-nots and canned tofu beans all the way from China. McLean filth uh huh. If he wants filth he should try hospital food. Motherfuckin' Egg McLean shove it up his nostrils. Box lunch in a baby seat.

Supermarkets are bright places and the milk is so dark and warm. Sometimes the meat smells bad, like dead fingers and toes. The Thing gives me thoughts that smell putrid. You can't tell doctors anything about putrid thoughts. Doctors don't understand, even if you put it in writing. They're too educated.

1986

Pro Re Nata:

Survival and the List

Nowadays, I find showers comforting and curative. There is very little that a shower won't fix. In the past, I was afraid to take a shower, because it brought with it bad associations and memories of showers that weren't warm enough, or worse, of being watched and supervised by hospital staff while showering, or being physically forced to bathe. So it is ironic that now a shower is on my list of "coping skills," the Pro Re Nata list I keep on my refrigerator door to remind me of what to do when things go wrong.

PRN

Take a shower

Exercise

Write

Read

Clean the apartment

Make a list of what I'm going to do and do it

Structure my time

Stick to my routine

Focus on something real

Don't listen to anything in my head that's negative or intrusive

Do head tricks to get rid of bad thoughts

Try to figure out what's bothering me, write about it or talk it over with someone

Ask for feedback
Do something nice for someone

Eat right and get enough sleep
Drink only caffeine-free beverages

And with the exception of the last instruction, I follow this list to this day. I developed the list on a recommendation from Dr. Mitchell, at McLean Hospital, who had me write all sorts of lists for all sorts of situations, and I extracted this list from the multitude of lists I had written. I was thirty-nine years old then. I am over fifty now.

The first group of instructions contains specific tasks. Do this, do that. When I first come upon a list, overwhelmed by my need for such a list, I want to know right away what to do, and this list tells me: PRN (meaning: take an extra pill), shower, exercise, write, read, clean. Verbs. The next set of instructions tells me to *stick to the list*, and to write yet another list if necessary—*pro re nata*—and to *stick to that list*, too. Following are some instructions that I am to do *inside my head*. The next set has to do with my dealings with others, that is, *outside my head*, and the final set touches upon matters of lifestyle. Perhaps “PRN” sums up the entire list, because it is to be used PRN. PRN is a medical abbreviation that stands for *Pro Re Nata*, in Latin, “for an occasion as it arises.” To a doctor, PRN means “as needed.”

It was long before I developed my Pro Re Nata list that I was a patient at Met State, where “to do” lists were made for us, by the staff:

Get out of bed. Dress. Breakfast. Medications. Day room. Shower. Day room. Patients may not return to dorm rooms until after supper. If a patient wishes to sleep, he may do so in the Quiet Room. Meals and showers must be supervised. Morning shower time is ten a.m.

And a note to themselves: Staff must speak English while on duty.

Why have a list? “Lists make things easier,” Dr. Mitchell explained to me, when I was working with her in 1997. “I want you to write down each problem as it occurs, how bad it was, what you did to try to cope with it, how well it worked, and how you felt afterwards. Do you think you can do that?”

I rocked on my hospital bed, and clenched and unclenched my fists. “You mean, like, an assignment? Write things on paper?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I will write down this assignment for you. I want you to do this assignment every time you have a problem. Do you have enough paper and pens?”

“Yes,” I said. I rocked harder. This would be a tough assignment. I had so many problems, it seemed.

“Then, we will write a list of all the coping skills that worked well. And when you get back to the residence—Hall Mercer—you will post the list in your room, on your wall, and carry it with you as well. If you are having a problem, you will go right to the list.”

It certainly would be handy to be able to refer to a list rather than a detailed dissertation on coping skills. The list form lends itself to a certain pattern: “If A does not work, try B; if B does not work, try C,” and so on. This list is long enough so that completion of the tasks would be difficult if not impossible to do in a single day, and

the steps can be repeated again and again, so the list is never truly exhausted.

When I was admitted to Met State in 1986 at the age of twenty-eight, the hospital, that was once a place of solace, became a nightmare to me. I had become accustomed to a nurturing staff, reasonably comfortable accommodations, hot food, and even choices on the menu. All these were denied to patients at Met State. The shower was the worst of the nightmare.

Surprisingly, I didn't mind taking showers at all after I left Met State. Showering didn't bring back bad memories of that hospitalization, or any of the other bad shower experiences I'd had in hospitals. I came to appreciate my warm, private, adjustable shower even more, with my own towels, my own soap (that didn't say "Lisa" on it), and my own toiletries. I moved away from my parents to a nearby town, into an apartment of my own; I could walk around naked if I wished, and I did so.

Dr. Mitchell helped me write the list at a time when I needed a list to survive. In the summer of 1997, Dr. Mitchell sat beside me in her office, and told me, "Suicide is not a wise option." Her voice was calm, confident, and firm. "You need to go to the list. Take a PRN, then take a shower. Take the dog for a walk. Write your feelings down on paper. Do the things on the list whenever you think of suicide."

"I am afraid that if I take one PRN pill, I will take the whole bottle," I said, shakily. "It is not anger, or loneliness, that makes me want to die, but utter frustration at my lack of ability to rid myself of Evil."

She responded, "Then you need to set one pill aside to take as a PRN, separate from your bottles. I am here to help you live better. I am *not* here to help you die."

At Met State, I wanted to live. I wanted to leave the hospital and then live my life. When I met with the Met State doctor, I expressed this wish.

“How did you get better, then, so soon?” he asked.

I wanted to tell him that once I had wanted to die, but now my rights, my dignity, my peace of mind, my freedom had been denied me, and now I wanted nothing more than to *live* without such restraint. I wanted to tell him that now I had come to appreciate what I no longer had: the liberties outside the walls, the gates, the human fences, and the locked doors of the hospital. I had been denied and now I wanted what I could not have. I felt like a leashed dog with a bone just out of reach.

Just beyond the Met State grounds was a mass of conservation land where geese gathered every year during their migrations. The patients at nearby McLean Hospital sometimes watched those geese. Tourists watched them. I had watched them, as a three-year-old, when my mother took me to a nearby park. I remember asking her what bird shit was. She didn’t answer. I guess she didn’t want me to know that there was anything ugly about geese.

“The passage of time,” I told the doctor, “is what got me better.”

“The passage of time, eh?” He looked at me quizzically.

I stared right at him.

He stared back, then turned away. “Well, then, you can leave today. I’ll release you to the other hospital.”

The doctor’s office was one of the few that had a window. I gazed outside as the pale curtains fluttered in the breeze.

“Of course,” he said, “if you’d like, you can always come back here.”

If I’d made a list at that time, it may have been a list of what I saw along the road leaving Met State, driving in my parents’ car: the man walking his four German Shepherds, the duck pond, the aging Fernald School for developmentally disabled kids down the road, separated from the state hospital by conservation land, and further up, nicer homes with yards, and trucks passing, hills and curves, and a yellow line down the middle of the road. We reached an intersection, and passed straight through to the highway.

A mirage of heat ripples slid off the horizon up ahead. I was free. Yet I could not get out of my mind the words of the doctor: “You can always come back.”

1981

**At the Crossroads:
She Talks**

And so I settled into the routine at Crossroads Day Treatment. After a few months I had taken up smoking and had put on ten pounds, though I wasn't taking medication of any sort that would cause weight gain. My hair became knotted from neglect, and I made a habit of wearing my orange knit hat to cover it. I dressed unbecomingly, choosing soiled clothing over cleaner clothes when I dressed each morning. I was hardly the ambitious twenty-three-year-old student on the verge of graduation that I'd been at Bennington College. I'd changed since moving to Massachusetts to live with my parents. The next semester back at school in Vermont came without a thought; I was still at Crossroads, and despite all the warnings I'd given myself, Irene was my best friend.

The subject was finally brought up in Group Therapy that I had not once discussed my problems, that I'd kept the focus on everyone else's problems. I was supportive, the group said, but very secretive. "Inside, you're either angry or scared," said Irene, boldly. "Today is your day to talk. Do it today. Today is your day."

The group murmured in assent.

"I fear," I began, "I fear that I will end up screaming."

Irene said, "That's okay. That's allowed, right, guys?"

Roy said, "There are other groups in the building."

"Screw the other groups," said Irene. "Let her scream if that's what she's going to do. The walls are pretty soundproof, anyway, don't you think, Roy?"

Roy had been an architect once. “Not really, but—”
“Well, then, scream.”

Jackson began to laugh nervously. “You’ll get me going, Julie. I could use a good hullabaloo myself.” All in your head.

Mental case.

“There’s such a thing as scream therapy, you know.”

Lights on, nobody home.

Loony tunes.

Rich Jewish college girl, you don’t even need to be here.

They said that after I screamed, the floors heaved and spat up something like lava, shook the foundations of the building, and tossed chairs and people helter-skelter. Pipes broke, toilets overflowed with a metallic, steamy liquid, the coffee pot imploded, Jenny broke her arm and Tina’s rubber boot went missing, right off her foot. I don’t know if that was exactly the case. People have a way of turning stories around. But after that, everything was different at Crossroads. I was one of *them*. There was no question now. I belonged.

IV. In a Voice of Her Own

1983

A Forgotten Line:

A Conversation with the Past

Later in the evening, I lay in bed and listened to the chatter among the nurses: “She talks now.” “Scully’s coming tonight.” “She hasn’t eaten all day.” Periodically, a nurse would check on me and ask if everything was okay. Lena came with medicine, which I took without protest. Later, she came into my hospital room and said, “You have a phone call. Over here.” She pointed to a pay phone in the hall, its receiver off the hook. “It’s for you. Pick it up. I think it’s your father.”

The proud parents. What did they think of me now? Would they ever realize that I spent years of unhappiness living under the same roof with them? How many times would I have to stumble before they woke up and discovered I had fallen? They were never there to catch me. They were years off the mark. I hadn’t lived with them since August, when I left Crossroads Day Treatment and hastily moved back to Vermont, taking Irene with me. Now it was January, and I hadn’t had much to do with them. I didn’t want them wrapped up in my affairs now, or ever.

“Dad?”

“Julie, don’t worry, darling.” It was my mother. “Everything’s been arranged. We’re coming for you tomorrow.”

No way! I couldn’t allow this. This was *my* life. I was no longer a child!

“Not so fast,” I said.

“What?”

My father was on the other phone. “Now, Julie, we’ve talked to the doctor, and he thinks it best that you come home with us.”

“Please don’t come,” I said.

“Irene said we could stay at your apartment,” said my mother. “She was very nice about it, but we didn’t want to impose, so we’ve made arrangements at the Ramada.”

“Cancel them,” I said.

“Now Julie—”

“Dad? Mom? I’m an adult. My home is no longer the place where you live. My home is here in Vermont. Because I am an adult, you no longer have any say in my care. Irene told the people at the hospital that I didn’t want them contacting you, but they did anyway. They violated my confidentiality. They broke the law. Do you understand?” I began to cry. “You weren’t supposed to know about this. I didn’t want you worrying. It’s not your concern.”

They both began talking at once. “But you’re our *daughter*. We *care* about you, and we want to know what’s going on. It *is* our business. The doctor said—”

I interrupted them. “Please don’t come, really. That’s my final word.”

“What will you do? Where will you go? How will you survive out there?”

“I’m an adult, Mom, I don’t need you people anymore.”

“Julie—”

“Alan, let her talk.”

“I can’t have her speaking to us like that!”

“Alan—”

“This is preposterous. Julie, you can’t stay there. Come home.”

My mother said, “What about the hospital bill? What about—Julie, you don’t have insurance!”

“Irene told me about—” I was expecting an interruption, but I got none, “about this law. Anyway, they have signs in the emergency room, you know, that say a hospital has to treat people regardless of their ability to pay. The Hill-Burton Act, she said.”

A moment of silence, then, “So what do you have planned?”

“Planned? *Planned?* Mom, this wasn’t planned,” I said. “This wasn’t fucking planned. I don’t know what the fuck I’ll do. I don’t know what the fuck is going to happen to me. I’m fucking scared and I’m fucking losing it, and my whole *life is fucked up*—”

A tap on the shoulder. It was Lena. “Julie, if you can’t stay in control, you have to get off the phone.”

“Okay—Mom, Dad, I have to go. Bye.” I hung up.

1990

The Graduate

“I’m going to miss you, Julie,” said one client.

“Me too.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Tim D said, “All the Jews are going to go to Heaven someday, Julie, and you are one of the chosen ones. Don’t forget that.”

“Chosen one,” someone echoed.

Maura said, “Julie, you brightened up this place with your sense of humor and cheery disposition.” “Here, here,” someone said.

Doreen said, “Julie, I will never forget you, and I hope you never forget us.”

I rubbed my hands together nervously. The radiator clanged. In the distance, a siren wailed, at first approaching, then passing, headed toward the center of town and beyond. I swiveled in my chair in the center of the circle, looking at no one. I didn’t feel thirty-two years old. I felt three.

The room hushed. I heard Liza inhale as if to speak. I turned my chair toward her instinctively, but did not look up.

“Julie,” she began, “You have worked hard in this program. I personally have seen to it that you have progressed. I have watched you mature. This has been your second time at Crossroads Day Treatment, and it is of particular note that you have done so much griefwork around the death of your dog, Hoofy, and that you have worked to resolve some trauma issues regarding the abusive relationships with your friend in high school and your roommate.” I allowed my glance to focus on Liza’s

icy fingers for a moment, and then I looked down again.
“You and I have had a *special* relationship, of course.”

Her voice hissed when she pronounced

“special” and “relationship,” as if she had a lisp.

In one heave, Liza’s face slid off her head, and sloughed into her lap.

“Here, here,” someone said.

1997 Scrawl

Nothing else works, so I call the FBI. A guy answers. "FBI." I hang up. I call again. "FBI!" What did I expect? That they would cure me when nobody else can?

I write, now. I feel the pen slip from my sweaty hand. I try to steady myself. "I cannot go to any more stupid babyish groups. I would rather die."

I pick up the phone. Something has to give. Someone has to help me, somehow. The CIA? The doctors cannot cure me. Who can?

I dial Dr. B. His voicemail. "You have reached the McLean Hospital office of..." It is a comfort to hear his voice. I want the message to last forever. At the beep, I hang up.

I return to writing. I must write quickly. "I have to wear long sleeves now, because of the cuts." I wipe the sweat from my forehead. Soon, The Thing will make a killing. I will die in my own arms.

Five steps, then turn, five steps back. Repeat seven times. Back to writing. "I count the acts of selfdestruction. This is not good." I retract the pen and watch the tip snap in and out, in and out, in and out, like my breath.

"No, Dr. B, I do not do this out of anger or impulsiveness. This is masterminded by The Thing." This I say aloud, as if Dr. B can hear me.

"What a joke," something says, and then I stop in my tracks.

What else did I expect? That today would be any different? That just this once, The Thing would leave me alone?

I say, "This is not good. Not good at all."

Five steps. The drawer. Turn. Turn again. Inside is a container of single-edged razor blades.

Fat chance.

Into. My. Arm.

Blade crosses rough, stinging skin, to the point in the flesh where I can cut no further, no matter which way I turn on the path.

I cannot lose The Thing.

"No sense doing that." Who has spoken?

"Like hell you can kill yourself."

"Like...hell...I can kill, kill, kill!"

Twirl around and face it. But where is it if it is in my head? Twirl around again.

Grab another blade. "Fucker, I'll kill you."

"Kill me, you kill yourself."

And I want to slice my head off so bad, this head that won't quit, that the doctors can't fix.

Kill it, I can kill myself, I can kill anyone. I can kill Dr. Mitchell, even.

No. Not her. Not one of the *good ones*. Anyone else. Banish the thought. Banish the thought and Bring a blade.

To. Her. Office.

To her office! To her office! I must! Grabbing a box of blades.

To her office!

I stop. Twirl around. Fucker. I will get you!

No reply.

I will get you! I will twist your evil body into knots!

I will gouge your eyes out! I will stab you with— with what?

Leave me, abandon me, forget me! Touch me no more!

The blades fall from my hand.

I pick up my pencil.

I will bring it to her office.

I will carry it with me.

I will bring writing to her office. No, Evil, be gone!

I will bring

the sliver left of me however small that wants to go on living.

1974

Locker #47:

The Door that Closed too Soon

I had to pee, which was unfortunate and unusual among girls at Lexington High School. We trained ourselves to “hold it” all day long to avoid having to use the school’s lavatories, which smelled of smoke, perfume, and piss, and always seemed crowded with “other” girls, girls who skipped classes, girls who got themselves pregnant and dropped out of school to get married, girls who moved away under suspicious circumstances, girls who came from families of scandalous divorce—the girls we never saw in class or anywhere at school, except in the dark dampness of the forbidden girls’ lavatories. I had managed to avoid the lavatories for three years, but now, in the fall of my senior year, I would have to take the plunge.

The stink of cigarettes would cling to my hair long after I left the room, I knew, so I was taking a huge risk. *Cat will kill me if she knows I’ve been in here.* But peeing in my pants was also a risk that I didn’t want to take. Slowly I edged the door open, then shut it. *Go on. Do it.*

I stepped inside. Three girls sat on the floor, all with cigarettes, one with her head in the other’s lap, as if she were a child. All three girls had Cat’s dirty-blond hair, an exact match. An ever-present hum filled the room, some air vent or heater, but no air circulated; the room was as dank and dismal as my emotional state. Against the wall stood a girl with bloodshot eyes and a tie-dye shirt. Underneath the tie-dye the shirt read, “Vail, Colorado,” one of Cat’s favorite places. I wondered how

long it had been since the girl had washed her hair. As I stepped toward the toilet, the smell of piss became more prominent, and I was afraid I would barf if it got any worse. A shorter, heavily made-up girl stood in front of the stall, in front of me, wearing a miniskirt and a purple blouse. There were two stalls. I peeked in the other. The toilet overflowed with toilet paper, cigarette butts, and shit. I backed off. The girl's grotesque hips moved to a silent refrain of "Obladi obladah," from one of Cat's favorite Beatles songs, as she continued to stand in front of the one working stall.

"Uh, are you going to let me go in?"

The girl put her elbow on the doorjamb, her hips still moving, and said, "For a price, sister."

"Like what?"

"Like whaddya got?"

"I just gave away my twenty dollar bill. I have no money."

"Oh, I don't want your stinkin' money. Got any perfume?"

"No."

"Drugs?"

I shook my head.

"Jewelry. Yep, you've got that ring on your pinky finger. Give it to me."

It was the friendship ring that Cat had given me. If I had it my way, I'd gladly rid myself of it. But Cat would be furious if I were to lose that ring, and I couldn't tell her it had been stolen in the bathroom, either.

"It has no monetary value," I explained to the girl.

"Call me Valerie."

"Valerie."

"Let me see the ring."

“I can’t take it—I mean, it won’t come off.” Cat had ordered me to keep the ring on at all times. She had told me that the ring symbolized the permanence of our relationship. *If the ring comes off, make sure your finger comes off with it.*

“Take it off and show it to me.”

“I can’t, I—”

“Okay, girl. What’s your name, anyway? Don’t sweat it. This is a pay toilet and you can use it for a dollar. Just pay me a dollar and I’ll let you in.” The girls seated on the floor giggled and sneezed.

“Jane. My name’s Jane. Plain Jane. Here’s a dollar for you.” It was the last bill in my wallet. If Cat wanted money later, she was going to have to get it from—from Sandy, I told myself smugly.

I entered the stall and latched the door behind me. I heard bits of conversation coming from all over the room as I unzipped my jeans and sat on the filthy toilet seat: that guy is loaded, ask him...that girl is loaded, what a bitch...this gun is loaded, so—

I tried to pee but I couldn’t. My full bladder couldn’t communicate to whatever controlled the on/off switch. It just wasn’t happening. I tried bending forward and putting my head between my knees. Then I tried leaning back, clenching my fists, holding my breath, squeezing my butt...I couldn’t pee. I thought if I flushed the toilet, I’d hear water running, and that might induce me to pee, but that didn’t help, either. I tugged on some toilet paper and found there were only two squares remaining on the roll. On one of the squares were written the words, “Fuck you.”

Those were my words exactly when I took inventory, once out in the schoolyard, of my belongings, and

noticed my pinky ring, the friendship ring that Cat had given me, was not on my finger. Those girls had either stolen it or it had fallen off my finger, but either way, it wasn't there now. My finger was a greenish color where the ring had been, and fish-like sweaty. I checked my pockets. Nope. *She's going to kill me...* What could I do? Hide my hand? Lying was no use. "Stolen," "lost," "misplaced"—these lies all led to the same consequences and those consequences were not good. I slumped on the stairs by a large maple that was shivering and shedding its leaves. All I could hope for was that Cat's relationship with Sandy would make the ring seem less important to her, so the blow would not seem so harsh when it fell onto me. I had a sudden amusing thought of arranging for Sandy to steal Cat's corresponding pinky ring...no, that would get rather complicated, I feared. I wasn't that powerful. I was more of a puppet than a puppeteer. And wasn't that a good idea for another poem? "I am the puppet you see on the stage..." Another quick inventory revealed that one poem I had written during Creative Writing class, the Kiwanee poem, was missing, and the note Cat had sent me (via a messenger) was no longer in my left rear pocket, either. The poem called "Depressed" I found in my right rear pocket.

The Kiwanee poem was one thing, the note another. Did the note matter? I wasn't sure. Sometimes Cat wanted me to prove to her that I saved all her notes. But the Kiwanee poem was another question entirely. It wouldn't be much use to the girls in the lavatory, but if it ended up in the locker, where my handwriting would be recognized, or even worse, if Cat got hold of it...

I *had* to get that poem back. It wasn't safe until it was safely with me. Cat was off someplace, I hoped with

Sandy, but I wasn't entirely certain. Either those girls had the poem, or it was still in the lavatory. It was getting close to three o'clock. Although I appreciated the freedom brought on by Cat's unexpected absence, I worried about the next shoe that might drop.

I hurled open the heavy school door, the one near the lavatory and Locker #47, and stepped inside, a swirl of leaves sneaking into the school along with me. A janitor stopped mopping, held his mop upright and stared at me. I bounded up the stairs and swished open another set of doors. There was the locker. Several kids had congregated, but I had no time for them. I rushed into the bathroom and hurriedly closed the door behind me.

All was at once quiet. Except for the fan, nothing moved in the girls' lavatory; no one else was in there except me. Breathing only through my mouth, I searched through the entire room. The counters, slobbered with make-up and scrunched-up paper towels—searching among the mess—nothing. The sinks, one nearly overflowing—papers in there? Pulling back a sleeve, the water slimy, stinking of perfume and dead cigarettes—only paper towels, no poem. The toilets? No poem. Stuck in the door jams? No poem. The trash? The janitor had already emptied it. I surveyed the floor like a radar: paper towels, a used tampon in a far corner, panties—anything under them? Nearly slipping on the filthy floor, more butts, more stench—no, the underwear, stained with blood, I nearly shrieking—no poem. The sound of water running...I had to pee. Feeling ill, I rushed into the nearest stall, closed the door and latched it, unzipped my jeans, pulled them down, sat on the toilet, and said a prayer as I let my piss flow: "Thank you God, thank you," though I had no idea what I was

thanking Him for. Then the shivers came again, starting in my knees, up my back, into my shoulders and arms and I felt my hands curl into fists, which I leaned against my forehead, my elbows on my knees. The diarrhea came next, and I felt like I was saying a zillion prayers all at once.

A knock on the outer door. “Julie, are you okay?” It was Betsy. “Julie?” She entered the room.

I could not say a single word. I had to say something but no word would enter or exit my mouth.

“Are you okay? Do you need the nurse? Julie?”

I pulled a long piece of toilet paper from the roll, thinking, yes, a nurse, that’s what I need, a nurse. An *adult*. An adult who can intervene. An adult who can put a stop to Cat and her madness.

I could meet with the nurse. I could tell the nurse about Cat. I could tell her I was Cat’s slave. I would tell the nurse about the abuse. I would tell the nurse about how my parents, my own *mom and dad*, stood idly by and watched it all happen, how they loved Cat, like a daughter...

Maria appeared to me then, her face on the bathroom stall door. “*She is forcing you...against your will...but there are ways you can put a stop to it, Julie...you can do it...you can stop her...*”

I scrunched up the toilet paper. Did I really want to change things, to stir up the pot? Did I actually want *adult* intervention? Did I want my own parents to know that I was unhappy? Did I really want to reveal to them, to the school, to the world, what bad parents they had been? They had trouble enough with my two rambunctious brothers, the stock market, and Nixon’s

resignation to worry about me. I wiped the sweat from my forehead with my jacket sleeve.

And yet help seemed so near. Telling an adult about my problems seemed like the most *mature* way out, less messy than running away from home or killing myself. I saw Maria's face again. "*You can do it, Julie...*" I closed my eyes and shut out the vision.

"No. No nurse," I managed to say.

"But are you okay?"

And I knew right then and there that I was at a turning point, that I *could* say that no, I was not okay, that I was suffering from a great deal of psychological distress, that I needed relief fast, that I considered suicide every day of my goddamn life. The nurse could help me get help. And by refusing to see the nurse, I was tightening yet another lid on the status quo.

"Are you okay?" Betsy repeated, louder.

"Yes."

I went to wipe myself. I had a way out, and had refused it. I admonished myself. I tore off more toilet paper to blow my nose. Tucked inside the dispenser were my poem, Cat's note, and carefully wrapped in toilet paper, the ring.

I came out of the bathroom, finally. Betsy stood there, white and perfect as she was, with her allknowing smile, her sprinkled-on freckles, nothing overdone. If I took a bite out of her she would taste like a strawberry frappe.

"I was looking for Andrew. He rushed off somewhere. Then I saw you hurry into the bathroom, and I wondered if you needed help. Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Dan went home. It is so late. There are only teachers left at school."

“Teachers. Eww.”

“I like teachers.” She ran her long, pointy fingers through her hair as if she were stroking a baby’s skin.

“Do you like Andrew?” I asked her, not really caring. “Did you read the poem?”

“I read it.” Betsy sighed. “And there’s something about it that makes me think.”

“Do you hate him?” I felt my face screw up, and I made my muscles relax to unscrew it. I didn’t want to look stupid in front of a future brain surgeon.

A teacher strode out of the computer room, followed by a tail of yellow printout. The computer was housed in a room that was an offshoot to the main classroom where about a dozen terminals were lined up in two rows facing each other. We were the first high school in the state to get a computer. You had to sign up to use it. I wondered if I’d someday be able to use a computer and music together, if I could ever, ever get away from Cat. But for now, that option was impossible, inconceivable. I peeked in from the doorway. It smelled pimply inside.

“Actually,” Betsy said, “I’ve decided I want to go out with Andrew. I like Andrew.”

Perhaps Betsy, talented as she was, felt trapped in some way, trapped in her own perfection, her pattern of being the cleanest, most meticulous student in our milieu. Perhaps her high “C” was too much for her, and now it bore down upon her, trampled on her white dress, muddying it with Andrew’s inky scrawl. Maybe she was going with Andrew, compromising herself, because although she wasn’t a slave like me, she *felt* like a slave just as much as I did. I felt sorry for her.

“Are you still going to date him when you go off to Wellesley?” We headed out the wide door, where breezes swirled the leaves mightily.

Betsy replied, “I don’t know about Wellesley. I really don’t.”

And that was all she said.

1997

Walking the Line

“Julie, how was group?” It is Kitty. The Thing is bothering me and I don’t know what to tell her.

“Kitty, you’ll save me from it, won’t you?”

“Save you? Save *you*? I asked you, Julie, how group was. Can’t you answer my question?”

“Group?” I am still peeling limes and sorting funny-colored pills.

“Group. Yes. Medication Group with Dr. F. Did you talk about your medications?”

“The Thing told me—”

“Wait. What did Dr. F say?”

“I don’t know. The Thing—well, Dr. F said nothing. Nothing, I guess.”

“Fine then. That’s just fine. Everything’s okay, then. With your meds. No changes, I see.”

“I suppose.” I suppose, but I don’t think she sees anything, she doesn’t see me. Her glasses are too dark for this dark, dark space at McLean fucking Hospital where pretty-colored pills wait their turn.

“And you’ve been to all your groups.”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Okay, you’re all set. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Tiptoeing from the Rehab building to the residence, Hall Mercer. Heel to toe, toe to Achilles’ heel. My down vest titters at me.

This sandy road makes prints on my shoes. Everyone’s footprints are different. I try to walk heel to toe, try to keep my balance walking that funny way. The Thing tells me to walk heel to toe on the center line of the road. A woman named Cherry stops in her car. She

isn't silly at all. She sees me crying and asks if I want a ride.

"It is so short—but yes." I thank her. She is kind. She wears a large belt pack instead of a pocketbook.

She even wears it while driving. I've forgotten how to drive.

"You were walking in the middle of the road there, kiddo," she says.

The ride lasts twenty-three seconds. I don't know for certain but that is my guess. "Goodbye," I tell her. She will not be back tomorrow for groups or the next day either. She will get terribly, terribly lost. I know this because The Thing told me. The Thing tells me many predictions about people.

The sprawled residence sits naked on swampland, and it never was built. The Thing built it before the doctors came. In spring, geese come here and bathe in the wetland in the yard. The building doesn't have a basement otherwise people would hang themselves there. People congregate like honeybees at the entrance.

"Julie. Julie Julie Julie." It's Tim D, a guy I know from way back, from Crossroads Day Treatment. He sits with the others smoking a Marlboro with his rosary beads in the other hand. Not far from where they are all seated is a deep area of woods.

"Shut up," I tell him. I walk inside.

This place is plagued with permanent darkness, darkness that carries the odor of stale farts in a rusty porcelain public bathroom. The light is low, nearly touching the floor. I tiptoe around a puddle underneath a place where the roof has wept. This concrete structure was originally built for autistic kids who wised up early on and moved out, leaving it to the turtles. Then us.

A lady in a pink sweater emerges from the muck. She's staff with a bunch of keys around her neck. The Thing tells me to strangle her with her keys. Her smile is sour as milk.

"Hello, Julie," she says.

The corner of her lip melts and drips like candle wax all over my fingers, squeezes them real tight. The edge of a scream pokes me as the waxy substance drips to the floor, sounding ping! ping! ping! Death is near; death is dear; death is wherever *you* are—

"Julie, I said hello to you."

"How dare you speak condescending to me."

"What? Julie can you speak louder?" She is wearing a pearl necklace. It is all I can see of her because I don't want to look at her face. Pearls beget pearls until her whole chest is covered with armor.

I ask, "Can you get The Thing to go away?"

"What?"

"The Thing. Please. The Thing is torturing me."

"Julie, we've been over this before." So she recites the Care Plan orders. "If you're not feeling well you need to go to your groups. Then you will feel better. You missed some of your groups today and that is why you feel bad. Tonight we have a group and I want you to go to it. And I want you to eat something."

"Can you make The Thing stop?"

"What thing?"

"The Thing that lives in my head and tortures me."

"Okay, we can get you some Tylenol for your headache. Come to the desk."

"I don't even know your name."

"It's Belinda. Come to the desk."

"Don't touch me. *Please.*"

“Julie, you don’t have to raise your voice. Derek, Julie needs some Tylenol.”

Derek practiced guitar, but sleeps now, his head melting like mozzarella all over the fretboard. I tell The Thing to send him a nightmare to wake him up and just then he freezes to attention, so I know it worked. He says, “She doesn’t need Tylenol. She’s just playing games with us.” Derek floats past me to bum a cigarette off Tim D.

“A fucking hour ago I gave you one, Derek.”

I head for my room, which is very, very far away, and my knees, my belly, my heart, my whole body is strangely calm, because I have pills in my far away room that could blow this place to bits of dust if I willed them to do so. A great relief comes over me like a hospital blanket, several hospital blankets, bath blankets and robes and pillowcases, and I feel like crying, oh Belinda, oh Kitty, Kitty, I’m going to kill myself, I’m really going to do it this time, and I guess I’ll miss you, but she won’t want to hear it, anyway, so I just keep my mouth shut.

I have my own room because no one will live with me. One girl said she wouldn’t stay with me because she saw my skeleton when we dressed; it clattered and shook and shivered and shocked her until she melted like a golden tiger. Another was bothered by the hours I kept, hours that danced all night long to music in my head. I say they couldn’t tolerate The Thing. The Thing put nightmares in their soup. Just so long as I don’t really live here.

All line up for the drill: my stringy towel, wet clothes in the closet. The Thing tells me the secret of my coffeemaker is as private as the lawn outside. My valuables and secret stuff locked in the drawer ALL

HALF-PRICE. Removing a pack of cigarettes from each pocket. Someone comes and I hide them—fast. The

Thing hides my private fire.

Belinda knocks, then opens the door. Yes, everything's fine. I will go to group, I promise. I will go to the arts and crafts group. You know I like that. Yes, I plan on eating dinner. Ravioli, again? Maybe not, then.

A smoking mission for The Thing. Don't ask, don't tell, except Dr. Mitchell. She asks right-on questions that scare me. I smoke in the venomous woods. Bananas slip out of her head. I tell Dr. Mitchell, "I go to the woods to die."

Last night, I gasped at thrashing dreams from pills I took. Pills lined up all sacred in my drawer, oh yes, the key is mine, bloody mine! The Thing gave me thirsty thoughts about the pills in the afternoon and all evening until I took a dozen, my heart beating like a sweating baby chicken. A pill catches up to me and I grab it in my dream and it bleeds like a knife.

I open the bottle.

The pink "caplets" are babies lined up for the guillotine. They squeal and hiss at me; they laugh like children. A glass of water on my bedside table gulps noisily. The water heaves with excitement. My mouth will be a toilet tonight.

I step over to the crappy bathroom. Lukewarm in the morning, you step out and you're chattering and die, a fly swatted by an ice cube. I brush my teeth, an attempt to get rid of the smoke stink, my "pearly whites"—damn! a *fucking mess*, wipe off my mouth, wipe my eyes 'cause I'm crying a little, oh make The Thing shut up they want me for Group!

I'm busy writing in my journal, do you mind?

Come on, the group is “Coping Skills.” Forty-five minutes!

I cope by writing in my journal.

I cope by writing in my journal, writing all the time about The Thing—*Evil!*—like today writing down when it comes and what I’m doing, keeping record, keeping careful track for the doctors, if they care at all, maybe there is a pattern to The Thing.

I am trying so hard to help myself

I am trying so hard to help myself

I am trying so hard to help myself because if I don’t, if I don’t keep treading water, I will drown.

And I don’t want to drown, unless it’s *deliberate*.

Looks like I’ll drown alone, the way things are now, ’cause nobody’s guarding the beach.

Spit into the sink, turn on the water, watch bloody foam run down the drain.

Coping skills, not what they think.

Sit on my bed for a while, I don’t feel so free anymore.

Try to build a tower out of my cigarettes but it collapses before I get too far.

I pick up floor lint until the rug is spotless, straighten the bedspread smooth.

“Julie—” I jump. “Julie, are you coming to Group?”

“No. But I suppose I’ll come to Arts and Crafts just to make you people happy. It’s cold in here.”

‘Yes, it is. It’s cold today.’

“It’s cold in here every day.”

My room has no windows. None of the chambers have windows. The group rooms pee like rats. The cave slinks around and sighs. The autistic kids that lived here before

closed their eyes, because the lighting was very dim. We are not supposed to see.

Dr. F says smokers will come and tear down the building with their hatchets. They sold off McLean paradise land and made it into parking lots and condos. Land of Sylvia Plath and Susanna Kaysen, crumbling. The Thing says it's entirely my fault.

Trying again to make a log cabin out of cigarettes, maybe a castle for myself.

Tobacco leaks onto the floor. I pick it up, crumble it between my fingers and then sniff my fingers. Then I go wash my hands in the bathroom sink.

I see feet in a bathroom stall—someone flushes—I turn off the water and make a quick exit back to my room.

I don't like to be seen

I don't like to be seen

I don't like to be noticed

Just let me slip safely through the crowd I read a note I wrote in March:

What happened to Julie? She got The Thing. Did she panic? No, she didn't. Does she have The Thing now? Yes, she does. Is she panicking? No, she isn't. Is she spaced out? Yes, she is. Does writing help? Yes, always. Is she going to be okay? Yes, she will. Does it mean that all is lost? No, Julie has made lots of progress. The Thing will go away. She will be okay.

This note follows me all glue-like, and I am tired, and without hope. "Progress." I take the word apart and it streams around me as meaningless as a goat.

Arts and Crafts, and I don't see the point but I go anyway. A bunch of patients at a table and a counselor with crayons and shit. My heart is all a-flutter. I take a paper and draw a map of the woods. Dead pine needles: orange lines. Dead tree branches: thick pink lines. Dead leaves: little purple dots. The road, with its yellow line down the middle. The "Unauthorized Path," McLean's quirky mystery: gray criss-crossed lines. Green ovals for the large rocks in the woods. I am behind a very large rock. It takes the police weeks to find me.

"Hey, what's that?" It is Tim D, his ears flapping like an elephant's.

"Just a design," I tell him. Grabbing another piece of paper and a black marker. Curved cigarettes in the center of the paper. On each corner: "911," "S.O.S." "Message in a bottle," "FUCK YOU."

Tim says, "I'm outta here. She's getting too weird for me."

Belinda: "Then Julie, you put your papers away.

You're upsetting the other patients."

"My heart doesn't feel right."

"There's nothing wrong with your heart. Just put away your papers or leave the group please."

Tim asks, "When are they going to fix the leak in the roof over there?"

"I don't know. Julie, it's stay or go."

"Goodbye."

I grab my jacket and put my vest over it, then head out. The dark green of the grass seems almost black in what's left of the sunlight. Trying to tread lightly, I step out onto the road, shivering.

Concentrating on balance, going over everything in my mind, created by The Thing. Heel to toe, fuck it. Just

stay upright. Walking the line. I heel to toe toward the traffic light up ahead on Mill Street. One foot in front of the other. Just walking while cars swish by, on the right, on the left, closer and closer to the light.

Fuck damn, here's security: "Are you Julie Greene?"

"Yeah, whaddyou want?"

"We think you should come with us. What you're doing is very dangerous."

"It's none of your business."

"You're on hospital property, ma'am."

"Not for long." Step forward, keep walking onto Mill Street.

"Your doctor wants us to pick you up and bring you to the CEC. Come with us. You have no choice. We are hospital personnel, and you are on hospital property." you are hospital property you are hospital

property you are hospital property you are

"The Thing."

"Come on. Make things easier for all of us and cooperate now."

"The Thing wants me to walk the line."

"What thing? We want you to come with us. Just ignore your voices and step this way. That's right. Just take Brian's arm there. Keep your eyes open, Ma'am."

"What's there to see?" The Thing wants them closed closed closed.

"Ma'am, you have to walk upright."

"I can't help it, I've got an Evil Spirit in my head that's talking to me right now, okay?" Fuck damn fuck damn fuck damn.

"The van is right over here, Ma'am. Please step into the van."

“He told me he told me not to.”

“Please step into the van.”

“Damn fuck an Evil Spirit is in my brain and nobody cares!”

“Take her where? To the CEC? Was her doctor going to meet her there? We can’t have people walking in traffic here. Give Rick a buzz. Ask him if we’re supposed to go on break after this. Could use a fresh cup of coffee right now.”

Coffee coffee coffee coffee.

“The Thing—The Thing!”

“Andy, this van could use a vacuum. What thing? Don’t worry, Julie, we’ll have you there real soon, okay?”

“The Thing! I could use a fresh cup of coffee right now. Please...”

“They have coffee at the CEC, Julie.”

“It’s fucking decaf!”

“Step out of the van.”

“The Thing will get worse and all they have is fucking decaf! I *know* this unit. I *know* them here. They’re a bunch of *assholes* and they think I’m lying about The Thing, they think I’m making him up for gods sakes, they think I’m playing games and I’m not!” “One foot in front of the other, Julie.”

“The Thing is real and he lives in my head! Motherfucker! Haven’t I been here a thousand times before and do they give a damn? No!”

The door opens, illuminating the dark stairway like a million starbursts.

“Here’s Julie. I guess you were expecting her.”

“Not really.”

“Supposed to meet Dr. B here.”

The nurse frowns. “We’re not supposed to do that.”

Another nurse-wolf rushes in. “We are here to evaluate patients for admission, not to act as babysitters.”

Andy has loosened his grip on my arm. He says,

“I guess Dr. B was requesting a special favor.”

“Where’s my doctor? Where is he?”

The motherfuckers behind the desk don’t give a shit about me. They just care about their overtime. I’ve seen them. I know.

“Where’s Dr. B?”

“Julie.”

I recognize the soft, southern voice of Dr. H. I can’t stand that dude. “Whaddyou want?” I ask him. He is good-looking, though.

“Do you want to go to the state hospital?”

“Oh, fuck you.”

“You want hospital? You go to the state hospital. Understand? You used up all your insurance for inpatient at McLean.”

“I’m *here* to meet with Dr. B. I *don’t want hospital*. Where’s Dr. B?”

The Thing: *Kill Dr. B*. But The Thing doesn’t say how. They call it “command hallucinations” and The Thing is full of that bullshit. Walk the line in the middle of Mill Street. Walk the line in the middle of Trapelo Road. Set fires. Destroy, destroy, destroy myself. Even people I consider fucking *supportive* are losing faith in me; they’re backing off, getting cooler, like the weather.

“Where’s Dr. B?”

“Do we have to take her vitals? She’s not here for an admit or eval. Might as well take them anyway. Take her

vitals? eesh, we need a peeds cuff for that skinny arm— Julie, don't you eat? Julie, I'm talking to you."

"The Thing's talking to me."

"I'm talking to you now. When was the last time you ate? We have meals here, you know."

"I'm not eating any of that crap. It's poison."

"Her vitals are fine. Do you need the Quiet Room, Julie, or are you going to be okay in the hall?"

"Aw, man..."

"Don't just sit there crying, answer my question!"

"..."

"Charlotte, Quiet Room for Julie, or no? Leave her. Okay, Julie, but if you're going to pace, don't pace in this area of the hall because you make all of us dizzy."

"Fuck damn like I give a shit."

"Julie, not here!"

"I *need* my medicine! It's time for my medicine!"

"You don't have an order for medicine. You can get it when you leave."

"It's time! Don't just ignore me! It's time for my medicine! Where's Dr. B?"

"Julie, I want you to go into that room over there, and lie down. Just do as I say. Just go in there now. Can you be safe in there? Do I need to take anything away from you? Any jewelry or anything? Are you wearing a belt? Leave your shoes with me and go into that room over there, and chill out. Don't come back here until you can act reasonably."

The Thing! "I believe you believe The Thing is real." Well, doctor, that's not good enough. Listen to me, listen to me! You're not listening! You don't believe me! The Thing is real! Holding onto the pillow, the pillow stuffed

*onto my face, scream into the pillow, scream, saliva
everywhere scream—*

1964 Jungle

I am telling you this because I did not cheat on the math test. I only lied about the score afterwards. I answered one question incorrectly and lied about it. I said that I answered all questions correctly. I lied because I wanted to prove to the other kids that I wasn't slow. Just because I now wore glasses didn't make me dumb-eyes. I did not cheat on the math test. This is what I am telling you.

I am telling you that I lied. I lied because I wanted to be liked. I lied because I didn't want to be laughed at anymore. I lied and the kids called me dumbeyes and said that they would never hit me. They said it's wrong to hit a kid with glasses. They hated me because I was smart and because I was forgetful and a slowpoke. Mostly it was slowpoke that hurt.

I was the slowest runner in the class. All the kids laughed at me in gym class. In gym class I was the slowest runner and I was always picked last for the team. I was picked last and laughed at. I was unpopular even though I was smart. Nobody wanted to sit next to me in class. Mostly it was slowpoke that hurt.

Mr. Brown asked if anyone got all the answers right and only I remained standing. I felt like Jesus Christ.

Mr. Brown asked me to come to the head of the class. I stepped forward and stood at the altar. I only lied about the score to prove I wasn't slow. My eyeglasses just reached Mr. Brown's waist. On his belt was engraved in tiny letters, "Tough shit, ain't it." You wouldn't believe me, though. Just because I wore glasses didn't make me

dumb-eyes. How many times do I have to tell you? I did not cheat on the math test. I only lied about it to survive.

1974
Pool

when you're down and troubled
and you need a helping hand

She tells you to run but you are a mere infant
on that massive august afternoon

close your eyes and think of me and soon I will be
there

She speaks her bugle ready to announce the plunge
"Jump on the diving board! Now! And sing this:
'Bouncy, bouncy, bouncy! Boobies, boobies, boobies!
Bouncy, bouncy, bouncy! Boobies, boobies, boobies,
bounce!' Now, dive into the water!"

you are but a vermilion infant on that white, wet
august day the backyard infested your fever runneth over
you cannot touch your breasts they are as transient as
mosquitoes
no clothes-pin can catch them

"Good! Now, get on the diving board again! Jump
again! Sing the song again! Bouncy boobies! Dive into
the water!"

oh baby all you've got to do is call

"Good! Now swim this way! Swim toward me!
Faster! Bouncy bouncy boobies! Bouncy bouncy
boobies! There! There!"

close your eyes and think of me and soon I will be there

You have reached her now. She flicks her blonde hair behind her ear. She grabs you, both hands on your neck, and forces you under the water, holding you there—

ain't it good to know

Then she lets you up, and you breathe, breathe, she forces you down again, and she holds you under—

winter, spring, summer, and fall people can be so cold they'll take your soul if you let them

1997

Walking the Line

“Julie, wake up.”

“Huh?”

“We just heard from Dr. B. Here are his instructions to you.”

“Wait a minute—”

“Here are his instructions—”

“Hold on! Isn’t Dr. B going to come meet with me here at the CEC like he said?”

“I don’t recall he promised anything.”

“Where is Dr. B? I want to talk to my own doctor.”

“Here are his instructions—”

“He said—”

“No, *this* is what he said. You are to, one, return to your program. Two, stay safe. Three, meet with him tomorrow at three. Will you repeat that back to me?”

“...”

“All right, I won’t treat you like a child. Why don’t you go wash your face, here are your shoes, and we’ll let you go.”

“When can I talk to Dr. B?”

“We have given you his instructions. If you’d listen in the first place—”

“*Listen?* I have an Evil Being in my head and you’re telling me—”

“It has nothing to do with that.”

“It has everything to do with The Thing.”

“Get out of here. Just get out. Wash your face, put your shoes on, and I don’t want to see you back here, understand?”

Leaving the CEC, I decide to bypass the residence and head for the woods. Everyone will be asleep by now, the cows in the corn, the sheep in the muck-muck, and the night staff, asleep on the job. The shift has just changed. Security guards are changing their armor. I fumble in my pockets for my gloves. Holes in the fingers, but better than nothing.

Feet crunching on pavement, gnashing
desperately as pavement turns to rough road
James Taylor was here once

Wet, dying grass and the smell of damp leaves, all
near death

Someone slams a door in the distance and calls out in
Spanish and I know it's The Thing, so I try to close my
ears but it's loud

Turn on the "Unauthorized Path," the road Robert
Frost might actually avoid, even on a snowy evening

The path opens into something magical and
forbidden, like blood

I am trying not to hurt myself

I am trying not to hurt myself

I am trying not to hurt myself

I light up a cigarette, the path narrows

Branches snap underneath me

I wait for The Thing

The Thing waits for me.

1983

**A Forgotten Line:
One Word**

The room was dark except for a slant of light coming in from the door. I heard the nurse's footsteps tap-tapping away from the room. She must have only now come to check on my roommate and me. I slipped out of bed and into the bathroom, peed, and washed my hands. My watch said 2:58a.m. I heard nurses talking in the hall. "This storm's bad...It's all over Vermont...That might mean overtime for us..." I headed back toward my bed, but then heard a deeper voice at the nurses' station. Alarmed, I peeked back, and saw several nurses and a man in a suit and tie standing among them. They didn't see me. I squinted and tried to focus my gaze. There he was. He stood about five foot ten, had scant, reddish hair, and was beardless, with large, square glasses and thin lips. Scully.

He turned and saw me. Our eyes met, but then he turned away. *Asshole. I know it's him. I know.* For months this man had avoided me. He postponed and finally canceled appointments, referred me to social workers, or sent me home without an explanation. I had never met him, never seen him, never spoken with him, and now he was standing before me, about twenty feet away.

Scully pivoted and walked toward me with deliberate steps.

"You!" was all I could bring myself to say. This man had humiliated me; this man had masterminded the whole scene and had caused havoc with my parents, yet I could only muster one word.

He nodded at me, then walked off the unit.

1983

**A Forgotten Line:
In a Voice Not Quite My Own**

The next day, at 9:30 in the morning, I saw Scully again, just as I had finished dressing. He held a notebook, which I assumed was my “chart”, and a pen, slung on one arm, and his other arm was free, which he used to gesture. Tiny beads of sweat dotted his forehead, and his tie looked like it was choking him.

“Miss Greene, it’s about time you dressed,” he said.

“I’m dressed now,” I said.

“You didn’t dress all day yesterday.” He pronounced the letter S as if hissing through his teeth.

“You didn’t see me all day yesterday.” Where did my sudden confidence come from? Was it fueled by a sense of rebelliousness?

“Let’s sit down.” I sat on the bed, he on the chair by the bed. He crossed his legs. “I understand your parents aren’t coming here, is that right?”

“True,” I said. I twisted my fingers tightly, then unwound them.

“I asked them to come.”

“You violated my confidentiality.” The words fell out of my mouth like penny candy.

“They are your nearest living relatives. I had to notify them.”

“I am not dead.”

“True.”

“I am not stupid, either, Doctor.” I lowered my eyes, wondering if I should be ashamed of being smart.

“Let me put it to you straight, Miss Greene: it costs two hundred dollars a day to stay here. You’ve already run up a sizable bill that your parents will have to pay.”

“Excuse me? My parents don’t pay my bills. I pay my own bills. I’m not a child.”

“Well, then, how do you expect to pay this hospital bill? You can’t stay if you can’t pay.”

“I’ve heard of the Hill-Burton Act, doctor. It’s the law.”

“Er, yes.”

“I have the right to treatment, and I have the right to be treated with respect.”

“I’m giving you—”

“No, you’re not. Do you call what the nurses did to me yesterday morning—the forced bath—respect?

Do you?”

“You badly needed to bathe.”

“Do the ends, in this case, justify the means, Doctor?” There I was: Julie Greene. Confident. Smart. Just like before. Before the hospital. Before Crossroads. *Before Irene rubbed off on me.* But no, before that. Before all the problems started. Back at a time I couldn’t grasp now, a time that slipped through my fingers like heavy rain. I couldn’t hold it and keep it for longer than a fleeting moment.

“I stand behind the nurses’ actions.” His voice had suddenly softened.

“I’ll hold you to that. And I’ll put it to you straight: there are very few psychiatrists in this town, Dr. Scully. You’re the head of the counseling center and the only psychiatrist there. For months I’ve been trying to get treatment.” At last, I was making myself heard. “I made appointments with you and you canceled or

postponed them all, or referred me to someone else who couldn't help me. I don't have many options. This is a small rural community. Word gets around."

"Okay, okay. I'll see to it that you're Hill-Burtoned. What else do you want?"

"I want a different psychiatrist. I want Dr. Levi. I've never spoken with him but I don't want *you* anymore. I have the right to treatment and I have the right to be treated with respect."

1983

**A Forgotten Line:
Welfare Scum**

“‘I have the right to treatment, and I have the right to be treated with respect,’ that’s what I told him,” I said to Irene, who came to visit me in the hospital later that day. She lay on my hospital bed, her head propped up with her elbow. I said, “So anyway, Dr. Levi agreed to take me on. Dr. Levi and Dr. Abraham, the psychologist.”

“Rich Jewish doctors. I suppose that makes your parents happier.”

“I didn’t tell them—”

“Come on, with names like that!” Her voice was raised. I was embarrassed. The nurses could hear for sure.

Silence. Then I said, “My parents don’t have to pay a cent. I’ve got Medicaid now.” I picked at a thread in the blanket.

“Oh, so you’re on Welfare now.”

“I didn’t say Welfare, I said—”

“The Greenes are rich and their *princess* is on Welfare. Doesn’t look too good. A Bennington College girl on Welfare.”

I hung my head and stared at the blanket. I pulled the blanket thread upward. It gave way, leaving a dime-sized hole in the woven blanket, revealing a bleached sheet underneath. I poked my finger in the hole.

“Rich Bennington College girl on Welfare. Julie, look at you! What can this Dr. Levi and this Dr. Abraham do for you that the community mental health center can’t? You’re just going from one incompetent asshole to another. Come home. Me and Daniel are getting married

and we need you to be home so we can split the heating and electric bills three ways. We can't afford to pay for parts for your car, so we need you to pay for them. You're being unfair to us by staying here."

"Well, I suppose."

"You can get fuel assistance, and that'll help me and Daniel. And you can buy my food stamps off of me so I can afford that perm I'm getting. Okay?" Irene twirled her diamond ring around her chubby finger. "So come home before things really fall apart at the apartment. Come home."

I could feel my heart. "Yes, okay," I said.

"You're coming home?"

"When I get better, yes."

"You can talk now, so you're better, right?"

"The talking's just incidental, Irene. It goes deeper than that."

"Tell me, then. Tell me."

"Well—"

"You can tell me anything."

"I can't."

"You *will*. We weren't going to hold anything back, remember? Remember? We're like sisters. Or aren't we? Have you been hiding things from me? Have you been deceptive? Have you been lying to me? Because if you have, you're not the kind, loving, *loyal best friend* you make yourself out to be. You can screw me easy if you want, just by moving out and leaving me barehanded with Daniel and the rent. Just by—" I knew the rest, the unspoken: that Irene dreaded being alone with Daniel, and that I could easily have ruined the reputation she'd built for herself—and her relationships—should I ever have mentioned that she'd been a patient at Crossroads

Day Treatment with me. “—but you don’t, now, do you? It’s because I have a hold on you and I will continue to have a hold on you. You *need* me, don’t you? I had a little talk with your mother a while back and she agrees—you’re not right in the head. You can’t live on your own without a little help from *me*. Me and Daniel. So you come home to us and we’ll treat you right. Come home. Come home and I’ll forgive you for being a liar and a bad roommate. Come back to where it’s good and we’ll help you. Forget about the rich Jewish doctors. Just come home. Oh, stop it. Stop picking apart the blanket.”

But I was already deep in the hole, deep in the folds and layers, shreds of white and more white, of disinfectant, wiped clean of emotion, unraveling threads of truth and lies, and I was deep in the sunken heartbeat I frequently felt when demeaned by another woman, another woman who abused me.

Tap tap tap. “Just checking.” The nurse, Hilda. “Excuse me, what is your name?” Hilda narrowed her eyes at Irene.

“What have *I* done?”

“Julie looks very upset right now. Maybe you should visit some other time. Is your name Irene?”

“Yes.”

“Irene, I think you should leave now.”

“Huh?”

“Now. This is my unit. Now.”

“King me,” I said to Hilda, placing my black checker on her end of the checkerboard. “That’s three kings. Are you sure you want to keep playing?”

“Bet you wish it was as simple as this out there.” Hilda gestured toward the window. “Out in the ‘real

world,' that is. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to get a bunch of kings to do all the work for you?"

"I earned my kings."

"Kings are a responsibility."

"Kings are powerful."

"So are you."

An oak tree bowed its branches outside, weighted down by February icicles. I had been hospitalized at Putnam Memorial Hospital for a month now, and had made progress to the extent that I had adjusted well to life in the hospital, but I had no confidence, nor was there any tangible or speculative evidence to attest that I would fare any better in the outside "real" world than I had previously. I watched as the oak's twigs snapped from undue stress, and imagined hearing incessant snapping and crackling of ice and frigid dripping water. I remembered the Beatles song, "Here Comes the Sun King," and shuddered.

I said softly, "I don't feel very powerful. In fact, I feel powerless."

"Just think about what I've been telling you. Irene comes in here and sits on your bed like it's her own. The whole room smells of her perfume. She has no regard for what is your personal space, your boundaries. You *do* have the power to change all that. Comprenez?"

"King me again."

"Comprenez?"

"I've got this game wrapped up."

"Do you?"

"You're clobbered."

"This is all about power. I want you to go out on pass today. It's a beautiful day, but you have to dress warm. Have you showered? I want you dressed and ready to go.

You have the power to do this, Julie. All of us feel you are ready to go out and get some fresh air on your own.”

“Me?”

“Are there any other Julies here?”

“Don’t make me feel stupid.”

“Go get ready.” And as I turned to go, Hilda added, “The silent waters are the deepest. You do, indeed, have power. Show us.”

I decided to wear make-up for the day. I never wore make-up until I met Irene. She showed me how to put it on, starting with eye shadow. Facing myself up close in the mirror, I applied a deep slate blue to my upper eyelids, very carefully. I was not very pretty, I thought, not like Irene, who was exceptionally beautiful.

A knock on the door. Had I been applying eyeliner at the time, it would have ended up in my eye, as I was quite surprised by the knock. “Julie! Phone for you! Out in the hall! Hurry up! I want to use it, too!” The other patient hurried off.

I knew it was Irene on the phone. Who else could it be? “Julie, Daniel and I have been fighting. You really need to come home soon.”

“Of course, Irene.”

“And quit this hospital nonsense. I should of never taken you there.”

“I don’t really know that it’s nonsense, but—”

“Do you actually *trust* these people?”

“No. I mean yes. I mean...no.”

“You’d better not. Is anyone listening? Do they tap the phones? Does anyone know where we met? Did you tell any of those people? Did you? Did you?” Irene’s voice rasped.

“No, Irene,” I said.

“You lie.”

“No, I haven’t told anyone.”

“What about this nurse, Hilda. You seem pretty chummy with her.”

“No, Irene, nobody.”

“Liar.”

“I have to go. I’m going out on pass today.”

“Good. Spend lots of money.”

1983

**A Forgotten Line:
Desire and Destitution**

The first thing I noticed was the light. Too much light. I tried closing my eyes. I tried covering them with my hands, but the light still penetrated. It was as if I were being attacked by light the way one is attacked by a swarm of mosquitoes. I wrapped my scarf around my head so only a tiny slit remained for my eyes.

Sunlight reflected off the windshields of cars in the hospital parking lot, most dusted with salt and filth from the road. Delivery trucks—hospital paper goods, oxygen, plastics—rumbled to the delivery docks at the “B,” or basement, floor of the hospital. Putnam Memorial Hospital was relatively small, this I now knew. It was a county hospital, the only hospital covering this rural area of Vermont. The other nearest hospital was Albany Medical Center, a large teaching hospital with a good reputation, about an hour and a half drive away from where I lived if there was no traffic whatsoever. Hilda was trained at Rensselaer Polytech, near Albany, the nearest school where one could earn a BSN. The other nurses were LPNs, trained at the hospital school.

I loved Hilda. I would do anything for her. I had a crush on her. I blushed when she came near, feeling the heat of my body and sweat on my face. I knew for sure that the other nurses—they were so stupid—were blind to the extent of my adoration for Hilda, but the other patients, or at least one, caught wind of it. I knew this through a series of winks and gestures, nothing else, as the patient rarely spoke.

But now, I tried to keep my mind off of Hilda, because the grayish ice was slippery and treacherous and it needed my full attention. Why hadn't they put salt on this hilly sidewalk? They certainly put plenty on the road. And why were the hospital and the handful of nursing homes in the area all built on hills?

Whoosh! A truck passed too close and it felt like it nearly would have hit me if it weren't for the sidewalk curb. Another car honked as I reached the stop sign at the end of the road that was called, appropriately, Hospital Drive. Here tall firs lined both sides of the street and small shops dotted the perpendicular road that led to town. I turned right.

There was no sidewalk here, only semi-frozen mud. Whose idea had it been for me to go out on pass, anyway? It couldn't have been mine, as I hadn't been aware that one could go on such a venture and then return and maintain one's status as patient. These passes were meant to give one the opportunity to "test the waters," but as far as I was concerned, the waters were nothing but Vermont ice under a cruel sun.

I hated winter. It wouldn't have been so bad if I had a warm place to live, but Irene and I were trying to save money, and we kept the temperature as low as we could bear. I had purchased a kerosene heater that we used liberally, as the oil heat was inefficient and barely worked. Our place was a half-duplex, more than we needed, but it was cheap. We learned that you got what you paid for. Having no warm place to sleep at night, I grew to hate cold weather; it made me depressed.

Did I truly belong in this wintry world, this world on the "outside," with people like the strangers driving the cars and trucks that passed me now? I came to an

intersection with a stop sign covered with road salt, and gazed at it for a long time. The people in those cars were “normals,” and I was not like them. I was different. I was “other.” I was a weakling, a mental patient, and I had made this transition—when? At Crossroads? When I entered the hospital? Or was it when I befriended Irene, who had crafted me into who I had become?

I stopped in my tracks, took off a glove and slipped my right hand into my left sleeve, feeling the warmth of my left wrist, then the forearm, my watch, and beyond, where the soft part was. I felt each scar from the cuts that I had made in the months prior to entering the hospital, one at a time, each edge where the razor had penetrated, and the sensitive part in the middle where skin had sutured in and healed the area. My arm tingled a little. I jerked my head around, thinking someone was behind me. *Scully*. No, no one. I pulled my hand out of my sleeve and continued walking.

Scully, Scully. Left, right, left, right.

I wondered if I had cut myself, back in December, because the weather and the depression were so unbearable. I truly didn't know why I had done the cutting. By now, the cuts had healed and most of them were merely white lines on my arms, no longer open or bruised-looking. The hospital was so warm that sometimes I wore a t-shirt, so my bare arms were in view. Most people didn't comment on my cuts, out of politeness I supposed, but in truth I wasn't at all embarrassed. I didn't want to think about cutting now.

The snow-custed mud was difficult to negotiate wearing only sneakers. My toes felt cold. The road to town was about a half-mile, and I'd covered about a quarter-mile already. I considered turning around, but

that would mean failure, wouldn't it? I'd return to the hospital "empty handed," and Hilda and the others would scoff at me, saying I'd chickened out, that I was dependent on the hospital and couldn't make it on my own, and Scully—Scully—even though he wasn't my doctor, would say that I was a little girl, and treat me like one, wouldn't he? *Little girl, little girl, you'll never grow up...* Still, I was truly frightened and cold, and the icicles in the trees threatened to fall upon me and slither down my back, and the sun bore down upon me. My skin was especially prone to sunburn because of my medication, according to Dr. Levi, but my ultimate decision was to plod on, to avoid ridicule.

I reached the Eleazar Baptist Church, where I found a wooden bench to sit on. I took off my scarf. I felt sheltered and protected by this church that was not of my own religion but provided comfort for the sick, the poor of spirit, and the needy. But then the wind blew and bore down on me as the light had, as if the two of them were in cahoots, determined to knock me down. I shivered and felt stiff and brittle. Trees rustled noisily and a dog howled in the distance. I wished I had a cup of coffee. Then I thought of Irene, enjoying a cup of coffee with Daniel at our apartment, nursing a hangover perhaps. I pictured the two of them sitting at my table, Irene's spittle dripping onto the brim of my Bennington College mug, her manicured hands clinking my coffee spoon, wiping herself sloppily with a napkin, Daniel reading the sports section of the Bennington Banner, she with the horoscopes. I winced.

To my left a man and a woman approached with a baby carriage. They were dressed in dark clothing. They spoke quietly to each other, panting slightly as they

walked. Their breath came out in little steam puffs in front of them in the moist air. I tried to catch snatches of conversation but I couldn't. All I knew was that they were normal and I wasn't. The world was made for them, not for me. I reached the end of the checkerboard and acquired kings only in a game; in real life I got nowhere. I didn't win. I didn't reach the opposite side. I didn't get kings, ever. It was someone else always telling me, "King me."

The light bore down, yet the sun wasn't out. The sky was gray and melancholy, as if it would snow soon. A man walked by eating a sandwich. I could smell onions as he passed, the odor disgusting me, and I felt that I would vomit from its pungency and the light and the wind and the intensity of my experience.

Pete's Wine, Spirits & Subs. I nearly tripped on the stairs in the doorway. How could I not have seen this hole-in-the-wall general store before? Of course it had been there. It had always been there. It was a ghost shop; it appeared, disappeared, and reappeared before me. Pete's Wine, Spirits & Subs—wasn't Scully's first name Peter? Was it his shop? *Scully, Scully*. A huge sign glared at me from the window: MENTHOL. It was dark inside. Maybe the store was closed. I stepped closer. And closer. My breath steamed up on the window, then disappeared.

"'Scuse me," someone said behind me. I hastily pulled out of the way as the gruff man passed me, swung open the door, and slipped inside. A rush of warm wind scurried around me and invited me to enter, too. I peeked inside. In the back of the store was a cooler where I assumed were beers and chilled wines. Immediately facing me and to the front was a display of chips, dried pepperoni, and pork rinds. To my right was a display of

newspapers, various hardware and tools, and baseball hats for sale. A bar was off to the left, with a television set showing a college football game. A few men sat at the counter, drinking coffee and smoking cigars. The door slammed behind me and the door chimes rustled in response, then I heard the latch click shut.

I was trapped. I didn't belong here. Weren't we all locked up? Hitler had put us in the gas chamber along with the Jews. And people on death row—weren't many of them crazies, like me?

Scully. Scully.

Deserve to die.

Which one of those men was the owner, and which were the customers? Or were they all customers? Did it matter? Who was I? I tried to catch snatches of conversation: "Sheriff stopped Ol' Davy for drunk driving again." "When's he gonna learn?" "Can't keep himself under control, that guy." "Stupid, that's all he is." "Crazy bum. Pass me the sugar, will ya?"

I nearly bumped into a lone shopping basket near the Doritos display. Instinctively, I grabbed it. Having a basket felt like freedom. I felt the smoothness of the cool metal handles in my palm.

The men ignored me, and continued their conversation and their coffee and cigars.

I perused the aisles. Ant traps. Rope. Rain ponchos. Coca-Cola, lots of that, in various sizes of returnable bottles and cans. The darkness thickened around me and I heard the chanting just behind me. I turned, but the voices always stayed just behind my back. "Scul-ly, Scul-ly, Scul-ly!"

Down another aisle. Entenmann's chocolate chip cookies. *Scully, Scully!* I tried to keep the cookies from rumbling in the box as I carefully placed it in the basket.

Surely, I was selfish. *A pig. Rotten fat pig.* The men hadn't stirred from their chairs. Pork rinds, Doritos, cheesecake pie, candy. These all went into the shopping basket. Hurry. They mustn't notice anything unusual. They mustn't notice—what, shame? The terror I felt at being found out for who I truly was? That this woman, this *little girl*, would eat these, all at once?

Scully would reveal me. It was Scully's doing!

Kill those men! Kill them! I grabbed a twenty dollar bill from my pocket, slammed it on the counter, shoved everything into my knapsack. The men never moved. I ran outside. Panting hard. Don't run. Act normal. Pounding feet on the pavement, tears threatening to betray me. *oh my god oh my god kill me you can take your Scully just leave me alone!*

The sky burst into a million stars.

I didn't look back, but I knew I was out of view of the store now. The street was quiet. I took off my knapsack and opened it as I walked hastily. The junk was all there, and it was all mine now.

The candy would be first. It was only logical. Candy. Ah, melting in the mouth and not the hands, no evidence, no mess to clean up. A seven-ounce yellow bag with peanuts. I ripped it open, then put it into my pocket.

Three, four, five, six at a time. No one saw, and if they did, they didn't *know*. I ate as fast as I could. The rest of the junk wouldn't go as quickly because my stomach would already be full. I knew this. Scully knew this, and he was the one who was *doing* all this to me.

I reached the Baptist church, and sat with my back facing the road. No. Too obvious. Besides, I won't see someone coming. I turned around. Dug into the pork rinds. These wouldn't leave the tell-tale orange on my lips like that of the Doritos.

I finally ripped the bag open with my teeth. Crunching sounds echoed against the wall of the church, and I wondered if the echo carried inside the church, to where perhaps parishioners were praying. *Our Father, who art in Heaven...* but I had forgotten some of the lines.

I ran. With the bag of pork rinds tucked under my arm, I ran as fast as I could, stepping periodically on bits of asphalt and stones along the side of the road. I nearly slipped on ice a few times, but kept running. I stopped at last at Hospital Drive. From there I walked into the woods.

The woods were lovely. Oh, they were dark and deep and meant for evil people like this woman! I could see her now, finding a seat by a large rock, hidden from passersby on the street in cars or on foot! *I could die here and nobody would know. I could kill myself with this junk.*

I forced more pork rinds in, then tore into the box of chocolate chip cookies. These I could always eat in one sitting. The faster, the better.

Scully would pay for this. I would hit him until he burst. I would break him into a thousand pieces. Scully, Scully, *be gone, Satan!*

Leaving the woods and some trash behind, I approached the hospital. Scully would have some big time explaining to do now.

I had to look normal. I hoped no one would notice the cookie crumbs on my scarf. But desperate women get

what they want, and I knew exactly what I desired. No matter what my appearance was, I would get what I wanted, what I needed, what I *had* to have, because of Scully.

I rushed into a private bathroom and locked the door. Sitting on the toilet, I ripped open the bag of Doritos with my teeth and lifted the top of the box of cheesecake pie, nearly cutting my fingers in the process. I balanced the box and bag on my knees.

Using the Doritos chips like spoons, I scooped up the cheesecake, and ate it as fast as I could. *I don't care anymore I don't care I don't care.*

Suddenly, the fullness enveloped me. I could eat no more. I set the cheesecake and chips aside and removed my coat. I tried to get up from the toilet but, feeling dizzy, collapsed slowly to the floor. I pulled my jacket over me and lay there, cheek flush to the cold, hard tile.

2006
QB

You call him, but he does not come. It's time to take him out again and you don't know how you'll make it through another walk with him, but he needs to relieve himself just like any other dog; his aggression doesn't change that, though it seems to change everything else. His personality, his manners, even his appearance seems different now. His fur seems so sparse, his eyes drier, his ears and tongue have a coarseness to them, a lack of vivacity; his eyes are almost glassed-over. The Prozac took his appetite away but did little else to change his aggression and you know that now, though you wanted to believe in progress when there had been none. Since talking to Dr. M, the veterinarian, Monday night, you have learned that this change is only something wished-for—and oh, have you ever wished.

You have lost track of the number of times you've told yourself and others that he had "turned over a new leaf." Now, the November winds have blown most of the leaves into the gutter and there are few left for turning. There will be no more promises. Nothing more can be relied upon in this world that is, for him, full of incitements, wondrous creatures animate and inanimate, and threats of man and beast, earth and sky. In turn, he cannot be relied upon to perform in any way like a normal dog. Only now are you beginning to realize this.

You grab the leash from its hanging-place by the door, and his head-harness, which Dr. M has instructed you to use. You call him, but he does not come. You call him again. And again. He springs toward you, then bounds away, teasing, his red fur flying along with his youthful

limber body. He is herding again, the action typical of Shelties and other herding breeds, but the behavior terrifies you. It is raw instinct. Nature, fierce and wild.

You know he won't succumb to the leash on his own so you resort to a treat. An Iams Puppy Biscuit may or may not work. He seems fairly interested. You toss one into the doorway in the hope that he might go for it so you could grab his collar and snap a lead on him, but he isn't going to fall for that trick so quickly. This will take some time. You decide to try some more delicious treats, and after three tries you are able to grab him while he is running after the jerky; you are lucky this time, but you may not be lucky again. Realizing this trick isn't going to work much longer, you decide to keep him on the leash indoors from now on. Until.

Until. Because aren't you waiting for something? Until. The shelters won't take him; there is only one more step. He is ill; it is not his fault. Then why? Why is there no place on earth for this dog who is ill, while there are hospitals and asylums for people who are insane? Why is the answer for him death, while for people it is medication and talking in posh offices? Of those labeled "ill", only a percentage are hospitalized or imprisoned, and the death sentence is rarely carried out. You ask yourself: what gives you the executioner's keys, and why, why is there no place on earth for him?

You zip your jacket up tight, double-check that you have a plastic bag "for poops," grab your own keys, take a deep breath, and open the apartment door.

He slips out into the hall; you follow. Quiet. You turn and lock the door behind you. No one is in the hall. Good. A quick walk to the elevator. The hall is dark, dirty, and desolate. If a newspaper had been sitting at a

doorway he would have been enraged. He would have attacked and shredded it as if it were prey. Especially the Sunday paper.

You know he will not survive Sunday because of the mass of Sunday papers. Someone will get badly injured.

A quick press of the “down” button and the whir of the workings of the elevator. The button will remain lit up until the elevator arrives and it seems to take forever. He turns. Behind you, your ninety-year-old neighbor peeks out to take her trash to the trash room. He likes her and won’t hurt her. Still, you wish the elevator would hurry, and it does. The door swishes open. Very neat. You enter, he enters, the door shuts, she is gone.

He is salivating. Isn’t he hungry at all? What does he think and feel and need? The elevator couldn’t be quick enough. It stops on the second floor. Kris.

“Hello. Why do you have that muzzle on him?”

You are getting tired of telling people about the head harness. You are getting tired of Kris.

The head harness is a collar alternative. It is not cruel. It is a no-pull system designed like a horse’s bridle. The vet wants him to wear it.

You are tired of explaining this.

“I think it’s cruel.”

You promise yourself next time to call the ASPCA for Kris. This should be reported. It is cruel, you agree sarcastically.

Trainers say use of the head harness can change the personality of the dog. Dr. M had hoped that the head harness would subdue him on walks. Some trainers suggest keeping the head harness on during indoor activity as well.

You wish Kris away and swish through the automatic side doors where a few of them are gathered to talk, a couple of the men talking about the day, gathering to talk about this and that, to talk among themselves, away from their wives. They see you and the dog and there is a hush as you walk by, and you say excuse me and there is still this hush and you hold the dog tight—he's on the head harness, not going to harm anyone, of that you can be certain—and slip by them and they resume their talking. Then you tromp into the yard where he pees long and hard.

You both head out toward the light and then cross over to the condo side of the street where the wall separates the yard from the sidewalk. He loves to walk on walls, always has. You pass the traffic light and start up the slight hill. The traffic is noisy. He stays on the wall.

Whhhoosh! A cyclist passes by. He jumps, snarls, barks as if defending against a predator. The cyclist is probably accustomed to dogs that behave this way; she continues on her journey. He continues to bark at her for a minute but you know the worst is over. You try to calm him but are interrupted by the noise of a lawn machine, a leaf-blower, across the street. He cannot stay within himself. He leaps high and barks, leaps again and snarls at the machine as if it were attacking his own flock of sheep. It is then that you notice that he has bitten you. Your thigh stings from the incision, just a tiny bite, but it hurts all the same. When did the biting start? Wasn't it about a month ago? The first time you thought it was an accident, but Dr. M felt otherwise, then when it happened again, you knew it was purposeful. A child who turns on his parent, who bucks authority...yet he is ill, he cannot help himself. So you remind yourself. But

this was a lawn machine, not an enemy he was protecting you against. What if it had indeed been a real threat? You try to put that thought out of your head as you round the next corner onto a side street.

Even as a puppy he was defiant—no, he was not—he was clever, not defiant, you tell yourself as you ease him onto the pavement. He knew when to push you and when to hold back. He knew how to get you just mad enough. He knew when he'd gone too far. He was a clever little rascal. At some point, he mastered not coming when called. Was it then that the aggression took hold? When were the first signs? His separation anxiety had been stronger than that of most puppies; he could not adjust to being alone in the kitchen for even a few minutes. You could not stand his crying but let him cry anyway. No, it was not then. Perhaps it was when he cried until you could not bear it so you gave him some newspaper to play with, with a photograph of the Mayor of Boston on it, and he shredded the paper to bits while you watched, horrified, not that he was shredding it but at his rage and defiance. When he was finished he looked up from his work, the Mayor's photograph obliterated, as if to say, "The Power is mine now." Had you tried to interfere he would have shredded you along with his newspaper and the photograph. You and all your pride. You look back on those times and you know even then, nothing was right with him.

Another corner turned and he hops onto a grassy area and pees. A woman steps out of a minivan about fifty feet away with her infant in a car seat. He stiffens and so do you, the fur on the top of his shoulders bristling. He barks, jump straight up, snarls, barks again, lunges forward. You call to him, but you know it's no use. He

jumps straight up again and snarls. The woman hurries her infant inside the condo and all is quiet finally.

You proceed forward. The dog has to be walked, true. But this will be the last time you'll take this route. The route is only around a block, but it's too risky. Someone will get hurt. From now on you'll take him into the yard, enough to relieve himself and that will be all. You'll keep him on leash at all times, or crated—until.

Yes, he is disobedient, but he can't help himself; he is ill. It doesn't make you a bad dog mama, or does it? Aren't you a bit embarrassed by his behavior? Aren't you ashamed of him sometimes? Just a wee bit? Don't you dread taking him out in public? Don't you? The mother of an ill child...

You approach a house you know you must avoid, so you cross the street. It is the garden hose running the length of the yard, along the front of the house, that has been there all summer and into the fall. He hates the hose so much, for reasons you cannot begin to grasp. Walking past this house has always produced the same results since the garden hose appeared: hostility, bristling fur, growling, barking, snarling and jumping straight up, though the garden hose is not a living creature.

Crossing the street to avoid it is the best idea. But a young man is approaching on the other side. You can't cross and pass him; you can't go forward. You decide to make a to-the-rear and then step slightly into a driveway. The dog will be facing away from the young man; it will be better this way. The dog obliges.

You go over in your mind the initial recommendations that Dr. M made: bringing delicious food treats along on walks, playing "fetch" with him, certain training exercises, certain toys, doggie day care, the head

harness...You phoned Dr. M every Monday night, generally it was after class, from Boston on your cell phone, with students filing past, to discuss the dog's progress. Some weeks it seemed he was better, but mostly he was the same or worse. You recorded his progress on a computer document, giving him a grade, A through F, for his behavior. The records begin in July, the date of the first appointment with Dr. M. Around October you gave up on the grading system altogether. It seemed ridiculous. You recall the most recent conversation with Dr. M: "I don't know how safe it is for you to keep him. Talk it over with your friends and family. Talk it over with your therapist."

It begins to rain. The drops are like tears washing your body. They glaze off his Sheltie fur, little jewels gliding off his guard hairs, the oily hairs that are an integral part of all Sheltie coats that protect the dog from rain. Not all dogs are fortunate enough to have this protection. Combined with the warmth of the other fur, the downy fur, the "double coat" is truly a well-designed miracle of nature. You ponder this for a moment. He's better equipped for the weather than you are, simply by being a dog, a Sheltie.

He stiffens and you know there is some stimulus up ahead that is bothering him. A squirrel perhaps, or a pedestrian. You see neither, and take a few more steps forward. He growls, barks, jumps. You walk forward. You must get home somehow; a to-the-rear will only lengthen the trip. What on earth is upsetting him? You scan the street for clues while he continues to jump and snarl. You notice he is beginning to foam at the mouth. A cat? No, this stimulus isn't moving. There are no lawn statues that you know of. You approach whatever it is,

mentally keeping your fingers crossed. A traffic cone. He is barking at an orange traffic cone sitting about a foot from the curb. Just as you are about to pass it, he jumps on you and bites your butt, harder than he ever has.

You shout out his name three times. You swear aloud. You wish you had a dog who wasn't ill, a dog who was normal, and you wish he were that dog. You wish that his tragic life had turned out differently, that you wouldn't have ever had to feel ashamed of him, that there would be a place for him in this world, that euthanasia—there, you've said the word—would never have entered your mind.

You hope that nobody has seen his act, and known your thoughts. Probably not. A jacket over your butt will cover the blood when you enter your apartment building. He poops; you pick it up quickly.

There would be no choice but to hurry home and get him fed, see to the wound. It won't be that bad, just a scrape, but it hurts; the emotion runs deeper than the cut in the flesh. You don't think it's bleeding much, but the skin is broken, that you can tell by the sting. He trots along. There are no more stimuli and you arrive safely at your building, toss the poop in the trash, and enter at the entrance nearest your apartment, zoom up the elevator and you are safe at last. No one has seen you. There have been no newspapers in the hall to attack, no children, thankfully. You were only lucky. Next time you may not be. Next time, what if a teenager came on the elevator with a basketball? He hates balls of all sorts.

Surely, he would attack the kid. What if a kid came in with a skateboard? And on Sunday the papers would come...the Sunday papers...Someone was going to get hurt...

You keep him on the leash while he eats. He takes a piece of kibble out of his bowl, drops it on the floor, and having nowhere to take it, being on his leash, eats it and returns to his bowl. You will keep him on the leash from now on. It is too risky to let him run loose in the apartment or anywhere.

It is time to take your morning pills; this you do without a thought. You bring him to the computer, check e-mail, nothing important. There is a message on the answering machine. Your mother. Call her back. She is your mother, the mother of an ill child. And she was ashamed of you. You know this now. But you will call her back now. You'll tell her he has a tumor, that you have no choice.

You swivel in your chair. Seated beside you, watching you ever so closely, is the most beautiful, smart, devoted dog you could ever ask for.

You step toward the phone; he follows.

1983

**A Forgotten Line:
On Earth, as it is in Heaven**

I barely heard the sound of the key in the lock—bright flash of light—bang of the opening door against the bathroom wall. A hospital security officer. “She was in there fifteen minutes!”

“We’ll take care of her!” It was Fat Laurie and Patsy, the two nurses that worked with Hilda, who a month ago had thrown me into the tub.

I am not Julie Greene, I am not. I lifted my head. Unable to speak. Laurie and Patsy lifted my arms. I didn’t resist them. They yanked me up. I stood. Left foot, right foot, Scul-ly, Scul-ly, past Maternity. A Pink Lady waved. I turned away, shaking. Left, right. Patsy and Laurie tightened their grip. “Come on, Julie, come on!”

*I do not belong upstairs why are you taking me there?
I do not know those people I do not belong there*

I am not mental. What are you doing to me— “She’s stalling us.”

“Julie! Hilda’s waiting for you!”

Left, right, left. Scul-ly, Scul-ly. Pediatrics. Hello, kiddies.

The whooshing sound of the elevator was more than I could bear. I was sweaty, my heart strained from the junk I’d eaten, from shame. Yet I did not weep.

The Unit was just as I’d left it. Patients watching television, smoking. Housekeeping staff cleaning bathrooms. Candy striper girl running errands. And in the center of the room sat Hilda, her arms crossed.

“You can let her go now. Patsy, Laurie, *let her go!*” They obliged. I stood, trembling, for Hilda’s inspection. She took off her reading glasses and placed them on the desk. She yawned. I could see all her teeth. “Miss Greene, you look despicable. Take off your clothes, and take a shower. These need a good washing. We’ll have to send them home with Irene.”

At the mention of Irene I could not bear to stand still any longer. I rushed at Hilda, all in a flash. Would I strangle her? I raised my fists. At once, Patsy and Laurie came in and held me back. “No, you don’t!” they shouted.

A growl emitted from deep in my throat.

“Patsy, Laurie, let her go.” Hilda showed her teeth again. “She wasn’t really going to hurt me, were you, Julie? Let her go. Julie, the bathroom is free. Shower, and then I’ll speak to you. Or has the cat got your tongue again?”

I paced. Five steps from the inner door to the outer door. Back and forth. I didn’t stop. *Scul-ly Scul-ly Scul-ly*. The rhythm pumped me up for more. Left, right, left, right, left, pivot! I pounded my feet on the carpet, wearing it down with my footprints. Left, right! *Scully, Scully! Throw him in the gully!*

I could hear nothing else but the pounding of my feet, though they made no sound over the blaring of the TV and the nurses’ chatter. I thought of nothing else but my pacing, yet I thought of everything else at the same time, only in pictures. Scully’s face flashed in front of me. Snapshots, each photo more distorted, more grotesque than the last. His ears protruding, his eyes gooey, dripping, his face on fire! I saw him on film, leaping and doing cartwheels, his giant body lunging forward

like a rattler! Left, right, left right, left—pivot! Left, right—this was Scully’s doing! He was controlling me!

My feet ached. My bones jumbled and rumbled in their sockets. Left, right, left, right, pivot! Scully, with his huge hands, crushing me like clay, Scully, building me up again, leaving me to dry and crack up here in this horrible Unit, then burning me in the Dungeon of Despair! Can’t he see I’m cracking here, cracking up? Oh dear Scully, with thy huge hands, *get thee off my back!*

Change of shift. Nothing but a new bunch of asshole nurses. Scully’s pawns.

The other patients were helpless, weak allies. They waved from distant shores. I wanted to wave back from my pounding world but my arms were flat by my side, stiffened, elbows only slightly bent, fists curled tight. I only saw the patients from the corners of my eyes. They were witnesses to this spectacle, this tight fireball of anger soaring at out-of-control speed toward a destination nobody wanted to see.

The TV flashed. A camera. Taking photos of me! Left, right, flash, flash! It got me! To be shown to Scully! He and his laboratory! Another flash. It would kill me, that TV/camera/gun, it would kill me dead! Left, right, left, flash! It got me in the gut! Pain searing through my belly, spreading throughout my torso and into my limbs. *Scully!*

I had an engine and ready gun. Ammunition lined up ready to fire. *Scul-ly Scul-ly*. My arms pumped in synch with my pounding feet. Nurses whispering, gathering at the desk. I paced harder. Bells, all sorts of bells sounded, church bells all over town. Townspeople gathered for the hanging.

Now! Fist into glass window. It buckles like crusty snow. Tiny swords of glass pierce my fist. What— watch her. Nurses grab. More nurses. Stop her before she breaks more. Trying to run, but paralyzed in my tracks. Stinging knuckles. Blood running down my arm. More nurses. Get the supervisor. What have I done? Scully has done this! Grabbing me. Crying, yelling, Security, nurses wrestle with me, I am pinned, oh God what have I done? Let's get her in here, lock her in. Good idea. I thrash and pull. Get in there. Just get in there, it's for your own good. Lie on the bed. There.

A door slammed and locked. *Scul-ly Scul-ly*. I am wild now, running from wall to wall in a scream, my legs crashed under me my arms flying shoes hurt hands bleeding. Bang one wall, run, bang the opposite, bang the bed, it rolls away crash to the floor. Tear the floor from its foundation, grab the bed swing up crash to the wall *Scully!*

He will pay for this he will pay I will get him.

But the fluorescent light! I grabbed it out of its socket—it comes away easily. I smashed it on the floor—bang loud loud loud—I fell into the glass. Nurses came in fast nurses more nurses I bite but I am not strong—they force me—to lie down—on the bed—get more nurses—I struggle—now I am outside myself— they struggle—more nurses—they strap me down face up and I am nailed to the bed, wrists and ankles, with leather straps. I see myself lying there. Like Christ.

A sudden quiet. The radiator clanked in lonely reprieve. I was unable to speak.

“She can't get out of that, can she?”

“I doubt it.”

“No one on this floor will get any sleep tonight.”

“I’m going to call Housekeeping to sweep up this glass.”

“Charlie hasn’t had his break yet.”

“Little trouble up here in the nut ward, that’s all we need.”

“Who’s covering her? Levi’s outa town.”

“Scully. Yeah, Scully. Beats me when he’ll call back.”

They closed the door. The room was dark except for a beam of light coming in through a narrow crack in the door. I slipped one of my hands through the leather strap. They hadn’t tightened it far enough. I yanked myself to a sitting position and unbuckled the other wrist strap. Halfway there. The door opened wide and Nurse Rita came in with the needle.

“Oh oh oh no you don’t, you sneaky little girl, you! Hold her down!” It was Patrick and Lo, like Patsy and Laurie, only meaner and stronger. Back on came the straps, around my ankles and wrists. Patrick and Lo held me tight while Nurse Rita unbuttoned and unzipped my corduroy jeans, and gave my butt a shot of Haldol.

The needle felt like a pinch, some pressure, then nothing. Chemistry. Scully’s chemicals at work. Scully’s damn drugs in my body. It was bad enough what he’d done to me already—now this.

The nurses were all dressed in dark hoods, like dark versions of the Ku Klux Klan. I even saw them carrying torches as they left the room, chanting, mumbling to themselves, “Scully, our God Scully...God save us Scully...”

Their God Scully the devil be damned.

I heard myself weeping softly, very softly. Who was this Scully? And who was God? Was Scully God Himself, or the Devil? Was I in fact Scully? Was I God?

How many times had Scully let me down? How many times had he failed me? Refused to see me, not shown up, denied me medication, blown my confidentiality, lied to me, hurt me, belittled me...but who had disappointed me more, Scully...or Irene? Irene, my best friend. Irene, who cried on my shoulders and expected me to listen to her constant overbearing complaints and whining about Daniel. Irene, who was intensely interested in my medications—why, so she could take them from me? Irene—why had she brought me to this hospital, anyway? So she could use my car while I was gone? So she could rid herself of me? Irene, who had asked me for everything and never given back a damn thing, who considered me someone to be used, just a *rich Jewish American Princess*. No, Irene, you are not Scully. You are not God. I know who you are.

As the Haldol flooded my body and brain, my speech returned. The nurses did not.

Hear, O Israel

The Lord, Our God

And I *did* remember the next line:

The Lord is One!

“You nearly got sent “up North” last night, you know that, don’t you?” Hilda asked me the following morning, as she removed the straps from my limbs.

“Per order Scully?” I knew “up North” meant the dreaded and very backward Vermont State Hospital, the place where chronic cases spent months or years incarcerated in locked wards. Advocacy groups had been trying for several years to get the place closed down.

“What do you think?” Hilda sat on the bed beside me.

I left that question unanswered. Shaking out my arms and legs, I asked, “Was last night, what you all did to me, punishment, or protection?” I felt very weak, suddenly, and hungry.

“Protection. To protect *you*. Think about it.”

“I think it was punishment.”

“How was the Haldol?”

“It was okay.”

“It got you talking again. Come on. Have some breakfast. Then I want you to shower.”

It was later that day, after checkers, after watching General Hospital and Little House on the Prairie, that I lost my speech again. Hilda, working a double shift, seemed more concerned than angry now. “I think we should try the Haldol one more time,” she said. “I’m going to suggest it to Levi when he comes

tomorrow. And Julie, you have a phone call.” Shit. Who was it? I hung my head.

Hilda called out, “Who is it? Lena, who’s calling for Julie? Irene?” She turned to me. “Julie, Irene is on the phone. Do you want her to come visit tonight? She wants to come.”

I sat and shook my head.

“Julie, then you have to tell her. You have to speak. If you don’t want her to come, you have to come to the phone and tell her, out loud, in words, not to come.”

I hung my head. Hilda left the room.

My limbs ached from the pull of the restraints the night before. I tiptoed to the doorway and peeked out. Hilda stomped down the hall to the nurses’ station, carrying my chart. The phone was ten paces away.

I would tell her not to come. I would tell her that I was busy. That Dr. Levi didn't think it was a good idea for me to have visitors today. Maybe tell her Hilda had given me things to think about. Or tell her I had a rough night and was tired. The Haldol had knocked me out. I would speak. No more silence.

No. I would say to Irene, out loud, in words: *Stop Running My Life.*

What could be more simple?

I took five steps toward the phone. I stopped. I stood. Then, I turned around, and returned to my room.

Epilogue:
2008/1997
Going Back

Stepping off the #70 bus, you retrace your steps to the place you haven't visited for eleven years. You thank the driver. Yes, this is Prospect Street, near what used to be the Waltham Supermarket. Eleven years ago it was Shaw's, now, it is Hannaford. Across Main Street is Dunkin Donuts, where eleven years ago you periodically had a bagel and coffee, when you could get away from the respite shelter. At five-thirty in the morning the shop windows were steamed up, moisture dripping, the air inside warm and smelling of donuts. The waitresses wore maroon t-shirts and name tags: Malva, Elena, and there was an older woman who barked out orders in Portuguese, wearing no name tag at all. The onion bagel, stuffed with egg and cheese, felt warm as a newborn baby in your hands. You ate greedily. You were hungry. A couple of men, regulars, wearing Red Sox caps eyed you curiously. They were in their sixties; you, then, were just shy of forty. Despite the constant opening and closing of the swinging door on which there hung a sign that read, "We Have Your French Vanilla," the bustle of customers kept the coffee shop warm enough. Yet you shivered, and kept your winter parka wrapped tightly around your bony body, hiding from the days ahead that you dreaded, as if you were walking straight into Death itself. The men glanced at you nervously, then turned away and shook their heads:

"Storm's coming."

"Another hurricane?"

"All week."

You remember those storms that beat down yellow leaves upon the roads, the slick asphalt, the threatening skies. But now, the weather is clear. Crows cackle on telephone wires. You bypass DD's, cross Main, and head south on Prospect.

You wouldn't call it an industrial area, not really. Maybe it was so, in years past. The street is now riddled with gas stations, been-there-forever businesses, and some that have closed up shop. You pause at an old gray home that has been boarded up—for how long now?—and upstairs you see an orange and blue beach towel hanging from a window, bleached from the sun.

You take a few steps into an unmarked side street. Better homes and lawns lay hidden beyond: white houses, several of them, with dark shutters, in a row, surrounded by oaks. The newer Hess gas station looms its shadow over its driveway like a huge mushroom cloud. Was the Hess station there before? You can't recall. The stink of garbage lessens as you reach Charles Street. At the intersection is a WALK light. You press the button, and wait, patiently, while others disregard the lights and cross.

And then, in a flash, it comes to you:

You see a very thin woman wearing jeans and a t-shirt, her skinny arms flailing. She is perhaps forty, or thirty-nine. She runs past you. Who is this woman? Is she a mirage? Her fleeting image flashes with the wind, like a flapping flag. She is warbling, uttering some unintelligible nonsense—is it—"Thing" that she is yelling?

Perhaps you have seen a ghost.

Perhaps she is a flash of a memory, an inkling of the past. Perhaps her image is a fancy of your mind, and of

this place, this harbor of memory—and of herself—Thing! Thing! No, she is a fright to behold just now; you will move on.

Up ahead, Mr. Grocer. The store's awning appears newly replaced. But isn't this where, eleven years ago, you came nearly every day? This must be the place. A few steps lead to the heavy door, where your presence, when you arrived, was announced by hanging bells. Soda, candy, cigarettes, gum, sometimes Twinkies. Candy, you recall, was on display opposite the cash register, where Mike, behind the counter, could easily spy a teen pocketing a Hershey bar or mints. Although now you have no desire to enter the store, you can picture the interior clearly. You had always wondered if Mike noticed your slight hand tremor, or the way you nervously shuffled your feet. The former you tried to hide by jamming your hands in your vest pockets. Every morning a man wearing a green uniform shirt came in at around seven-fifteen to buy lottery tickets. You recall that the number began with "891."

But Mike generally stopped him. "I know. The usual." The man always played his girlfriend's phone number. "And a Quick-Pick, right?" Mike filled out a card, then punched in some codes into the Mass Lottery register.

"Fifty, this time."

"You never play that much, Grady. Feeling lucky?" Mike turned to you and asked, "What do you want this time, Marlboros?"

Grady said, "It's my ex's birthday."

Mike took a sip of his coffee, which had probably been sitting on the counter for hours, then reached for your cigarettes. "Grady, give up. She don't give a shit about you."

Perhaps, then, you had walked, or fled, back from Mr. Grocer to the respite shelter where you were staying at that time, eleven years ago, in the building at the intersection of Prospect and Sharon. This large, ugly, concrete structure has since been transformed into one of Brandeis University's art studios. Inside was a large common room surrounded by four bedrooms, a kitchen, an office, two bathrooms, and a storage room that was used for laundry. You remember the towels supplied for you at the respite shelter: plush, darkcolored towels, different colors on each side. You could do your own laundry there. You recall the smell of the fabric softener you used for your towels: Downy. A soda machine and a couple of tables were scattered inside the room. It was at these tables that you played checkers with the staff counselor, Nancy B. You loved Nancy; she was your favorite. You loved her smile, her wisdom and wit, the fact that she was always right. "If you think you are losing touch with the present, and slipping too much into your head," she said, "and into those bad thoughts, try touching something real, something solid, and holding onto it. Maybe the chair you're sitting in. Or your clothes. Focus on something real." She placed her black checker at your end of the board. "King me."

"It's a wrap," you said to Nancy. "You've got me again. There's no way in hell I can catch up, with all those kings of yours."

"You can—and will, someday."

And now, eleven years later, you hear the screaming again. "Thing! Thing!" It seems to come from within, yet you cover your ears. You step onward.

You reach the cemetery, and here, the forbidden path, with its "No Trespassing" sign, hidden by October

branches. You recall that the path climbed upward to the railroad tracks. Eleven years ago, you easily and unobtrusively stepped past the metal gate that blocked the path partway up the hill. Beyond, the vegetation cleared, and the stony ground beneath you brightened in the sunlight. Turning to the left, you dipped down a steep embankment into an area shaded by maples and oaks, where you sat, every day, daring yourself to jump in front of a commuter train.

You knew the schedule by heart.

But you do not dare climb the path now, lest you be caught by the police. Or are you afraid of the memories, the associations, the train itself? Your heart quickens. You realize that the path looks exactly the same as you remember it. Is your hideout still the same? Others had been there, teens drinking, perhaps having sex in the deep of the night. An army blanket had been laid out by an anonymous donor in the dip of the land for convenience, beer cans and cigarette burns left in its corners. You buried your cigarettes in the wet leaves, careful not to start a fire. The smell of burning leaves stung your nose and left a guilty feeling. The view from the hideout startled you; up on high you could see a fair amount of the cemetery, the dead there, an occasional visitor, and hearses trailed by black cars paraded sadly through the maze of roads between the grave markers.

Once, you saw a lone policeman surveying the train tracks, just feet from where you sat, shaded by woods.

The traffic is heavy now and the road narrows as you reach the bridge over the Charles River. Vegetation has wrapped itself around the bridge, and it's hard to believe that a river lies under it. You peer through the chain-link fence that separates the road from the rocky shore.

Between maple branches you can see the Charles, its arms outstretched, waiting—for what?

But you don't cross over the bridge; instead, you cross the road to the park, a walkway along the Charles that runs uninterrupted from Prospect Street to Moody Street. Greeting you is the sign, "Notice: Park Closed at Dusk. No Trespassing." So many signs. Here you proceed downhill into an oasis of hope.

The maples and pines are lined up along the path, bowing gracefully to you as you pass. You can almost hear them speaking, "Peace, peace." For in this place you sought solace eleven years ago. More than once, you secretly stole off and walked from the respite to the drugstore on Main Street to buy pills, and instead came away with a loaf of bread that you fed to the ducks in this park. How did this happen? Surely, it was a simple task: Benadryl, store brand, cost under ten dollars; you brought with you a ten dollar bill; you feigned interest in shampoo for a moment, lest someone guess that you were a desperate thirty-nine-year-old planning to take an overdose, then headed toward the COLD REMEDIES aisle, but your legs took over; they worked independently of your mind; they pulled you to GROCERIES. This trick, this sleight of hand, that sent you down the bread aisle instead of the antihistamine aisle, happened not once but many times.

Now, you seek the place where you fed the ducks. It must have been further up, because here, thick vegetation blocks the area between the path and the Charles. Here and there, benches line the path, facing the river. An old tweed jacket has been tossed aside and abandoned.

It seems as though it might rain. A man with a stroller passes, not noticing you at all. But the clouds move on. To your left lies sprawled a large, vacant parking lot. You search for the screaming woman in the lot; she is not there. Relieved, you move on.

The trees along the river clear now, and are replaced by a grassy area. Here must have been the place where you fed scraps of Wonder Bread to the ducks. The ducks immediately knew who you were, or at least that what they were about to receive was worth fighting over. They pushed toward you, now closer, until they nearly touched your feet. Some flapped their wings. They pecked at each other, fretting, jealously arguing over who would eat first. You held off as long as you dared, then you began to toss pieces of bread. As each bit fell, the ducks rushed forward as if it were the last and only piece. Chuckling, you fed them more, until the entire loaf was spent.

Where are the ducks now? Where are the children, who, eleven years ago, came with their parents and squealed with delight at the quarreling ducks? There isn't a child in sight. Disappointed, you move on. But you notice that off to your left, the train tracks loom closer now, just beyond a chain-link fence.

Up ahead is the bridge at Moody Street. You are nearing the end of your walk. Just then, a lone duck floats in your direction. Clouds part and sunlight reflects off the water, where you see another duck, and now another. You walk further. Coming from behind are three more ducks, triangles of wake following them. Several of them swim to the rocky shore to greet you, now more, now twenty or so gather around you, snapping at each other like schoolchildren, and then you recall the ducks'

message, that they had quacked out as you fed them bread, as clearly as it had been eleven years ago: “You can—and will, someday.”

You know the thin woman is screaming now, but she cannot be heard over the incessant quacking of ducks on the river. Relieved, you watch them for a while. They poke at each other with their beaks and fruitlessly pick up debris floating in the river, thinking that it is food.

You have reached Moody Street. You cross the train tracks without a thought. In Boston, the tracks end. The river continues, and pushes its water into the great, wide Atlantic.

In another minute you reach Carter Street, where the buses stop. People alongside you are waiting for the same bus, the #70. This, at last, is the bus home.

Home.

