

and not strand up in the middle and shout, "Oh, my God, you can see the crew backstage!" There was a point at which the study of something became a frightening and naive thing.

"But, Dennis, really, why do you think so much about love, of someone loving you or not loving you? That is all you read about, all you talk about."

"Put the starving people of the world together in a room, and what you get is a lot of conversation about roast beef. They should be talking about the Napoleonic Code?" At the mention of roast beef, Mave's face lit up, greenish, fluorescent. She looked past Dennis and saw the waitress coming toward their table at last; she was moving slowly, meanly, scowling. There was a large paper dolly stuck to her shoe. "I mean . . ." Dennis was saying, looking pointedly at Mave, but Mave was watching the waitress approach. *Oh, life, oh, sweet, forgiven for the ice . . .* He grabbed Mave's wrist. There was always an emergency. And then there was love. And then there was another emergency. That was the sandwiching of it. Emergency. Love. Emergency. "I mean, it's not as if you've been dozing off," Dennis was saying, his voice reaching her now, high and watery. "I mean, correct me if I'm wrong," he said, "but I don't think I've been having this conversation alone." He tightened his grip. "I mean, have I?"

## Like Life

*Everybody likes the circus.*

*Clowns! elephants! trained horses! peanuts!*

*Everybody likes the circus.*

*Acrobats! tight-rope walkers! camels! band music!*

*Suppose you had a choice of going to the circus*

*or painting a picture. Which would you choose?*

*You'd choose the circus.*

*Everybody likes the circus.*

—V. M. Hilmyer and E. G. Huey,

*A Child's History of Art*

ALL THE MOVIES that year were about people with plates in their heads: Spirits from another galaxy gather in a resort town at night, taking over the townspeople—all but the man with the plate in his head. Or: A girl with a plate in her head wanders a city beach, believing she is someone else. Evidence washes up on shore. There are sailors. Or: A woman dreams of a beautiful house in which no one lives, and one day she passes the actual house—a cupola, gables, and a porch. She walks up to it, knocks on the door, and it is opened slowly by

her! a woman who is a twin of herself, grinning. She has a plate in her head.

Life seemed to have become like that. It had burst out of itself, like a bug.

In February a thaw gave the city the weepy ooze of a wound. There were many colds, people coughing in the subways. The sidewalks foamed to a cheese of spit, and the stoops, doorways, bus shelters were hedged with Rosies—that is what they were called—the jobless men, women, children with gourd lumps or fevers, imploring, hating eyes, and puffed lavender mouths, stark as paintings of mouths. The Rosies sold flowers: a prim tulip, an overflowing iris. Mostly no one bought any. Mostly it was just other Rosies, trading bloom for bloom, until one of them, a woman or a child, died in the street, the others gathering around in a wail, in the tiny, dark morning hours, which weren't morning at all but night.

THAT YEAR was the first that it became illegal—for those who lived in apartments or houses—not to have a television. The government claimed that important information, information necessary for survival, might need to be broadcast automatically, might need simply to burst on, which it could do. Civilization was at stake, it was said. "Already at the stake," said others, who had come to suspect that they were being spied on, controlled, that what they had thought when they were little—that the people on the television could also see you—now was true. You were supposed to leave it plugged in at all times, the plastic antenna raised in a V—for victory or peace, no one could say.

Mamie lost sleep. She began to distrust things, even her own words; too much had moved in. Objects implanted in your body—fillings, earrings, contraceptives—like satellite dishes, could be picking up messages, substituting their words for yours, feeding you lines. You never knew. Open your mouth,

it might betray you with lies, with lackadaise, with moods and speak not your own. The things you were saying might be old radio programs bounced off the foil of your molars, or taxi calls fielded by the mussely glove of your ear. What you described as real might be only a picture, something from *Life* magazine you were forced to live out, after the photography, in imitation. Whole bodies, perhaps, could be ventriloquized. Approximated. You could sit on the lap of a thing and just move your lips. You could become afraid. You could become afraid someone was making you afraid: a new fear, like a gourmet's, a paranoid's paranoia.

This was not the future. This was what was with you now in the house.

Mamie lived in a converted beauty parlor storefront—a tin ceiling, a stench of turpentine, and extra sinks. At night her husband, a struggling painter, moody and beer-breathed, lay sleeping next to her, curled against her, an indifferent whistle in his nose. She closed her eyes. *What all to love in the world*, went a prayer from her childhood. What all to love?

The lumber of his bones piled close.

The radiator racked and spitting. Hear flapping like birds up the pipes.

SHE REMAINED AWAKE. On nights when she did sleep, her dreams were about the end of life. They involved getting somewhere, getting to the place where she was supposed to die, where it was OK. She was always in a group, like a fire drill or a class trip. Can we die here? Are we there yet? Which way can it possibly be?

Or else there was the house dream. Always the house dream, like the movie of the dream of the house. She would find a house, knock on the door, and it would open slowly, a wedge of dark, and then stop, her own profile greeting her, hanging there midair like a chandelier.

*Death*, said her husband, Rudy. He kept a small hatchet under the mattress, in case of intruders. *Death*. Last year she had gone to a doctor, who had looked at her throat and a mole on her back, studying them like Rorschachs for whatever he might see in them. He removed the mole and put it floating in a pathologist's vial, a tiny marine animal. Peering in at her throat, he said, "Precancer"—like a secret or a zodiac sign.

"Precancer?" she had repeated quietly, for she was a quiet woman. "Isn't that . . . like *life*?" She was sitting, and he was standing. He fumbled with some alcohol and cotton balls, which he kept on the counter in kitcheny-looking jars, the flour and sugar of the medical world.

He took her wrist and briefly squeezed. "It's *like* life, but it's not *necessarily* life."

THERE WAS a wrought-iron fence all around and a locked gate, but it was the bird feeder she remarked first, the wooden arms, the open mouth of boards stuck up there on a single leg. It was nearing Valentine's Day, an angry slosh of a morning, and she was on her way to a realtor, a different one this time, not far from the Fourth and Smith stop of the F train—from where you could see the Statue of Liberty. On her way, she had come upon a house with a bird feeder. A bird feeder! And a tree in front, a towering oak, over one hundred fifty years old. A grade school teacher had brought her class to it and now stood in front of it, pointing and saying, "A hundred and fifty years ago. Can anyone tell me when that was?"

But it was the bird feeder, initially: a cross with an angle-roofed shelter at the head—a naked scarecrow bedecked with horizontals like a Frank Lloyd Wright house, or an alpine motel, its wooden ledges strewn with miller seed. In the freckled snow below lay tiny condiment cups of peanut butter, knocked to the ground. A flibberty squirrel, hopping and pausing in

spasms, lifted each cup to his nose and nibbled. On the feeder itself was a pair of pigeons—liddless, thick-necked, municipal gargoyles; but there, wasn't that also a sparrow? And a grosbeak?

The house was a real house, one of the few left in New York. A falling-down Edwardian Gothic with a cupola, once painted a silvery gray and now chipping. There was a porch and latticework of carpenter's lace—a house one would go to for piano lessons, if people still took piano lessons, a house invariably seized for a funeral home. It was squeezed between two storefronts—the realtor's and a laundromat.

"You're looking for a one-bedroom?" said the realtor.

"Yes," said Mamie, though it suddenly seemed both too little and too much to ask for. The realtor had the confident hair and makeup of a woman who had lived forever in New York, a woman who knew ever so wearily how to tie a scarf. Mamie studied the realtor's scarf, guessing the exact geometry of the folds, the location of the knot. If Mamie ever had surgery, scars in a crisscross up her throat, she would have to know such things. A hat, a scarf, a dot of rouge, mints in the mouth: Everyone in New York was hiding something, eventually.

The real estate agent took out an application form. She picked up a pen. "Your name?"

"Mamie Courmand."

"*What?* Here. You fill this out."

It was pretty much the same form she'd filled out previously at other agencies. What sort of apartment are you looking for; how much do you make; how do you make it . . . ?

"What is children's historical illustrator?" deadpanned the realtor. "If you don't mind me asking."

"I, uh, work on a series of history publications, picture books actually, for chil—"

"Free lance?" She looked at Mamie with doubt, suspicion, and then with sympathy to encourage candor.

"It's for the McWilliams Company." She began to lie. "I've got an office there that I use. The address is written here." She rose slightly from her seat, to point it out.

The realtor pulled away. "I'm oriented," she said.

"Oriented?"

"You don't need to reach and point. This your home and work phone? This your age . . . ? You forgot to put in your age."

"Thirty-five."

"Thirty-five," she repeated, writing it in. "You look younger." She looked at Mamie. "What are you willing to pay?"

"Um, up to nine hundred or so."

"Good luck," she snorted, and still seated in her castor-wheeled chair, she trundled over to the file cabinet, lifted out a manila folder, flipped it open. She placed Mamie's application on top. "This isn't the eighties anymore, you know."

Mamie cleared her throat. Deep in the back she could feel the wound sticking there, unhealed. "It hasn't not been for very long. I mean, just a few years." The awkward, frightened look had leaped to her eyes again, she knew. Fear making a child of her face—she hated this in herself. As a girl, she had always listened in a slightly stricken way and never spoke unless she was asked a question. When she was in college she was the kind of student sometimes too anxious to enter the cafeteria. Often she just stayed in her room and drank warm iced tea from a mix and a Hot Pot. "You live right over here?" The realtor motioned behind her. "Why are you moving?"

"I'm leaving my husband."

The corner of her mouth curled. "*In this day and age?* Good luck." She shrugged and spun around to dig through files again. There was a long silence, the realtor shaking her head.

Mamie craned her neck. "I'd like to see what you have, at any rate."

"We've got nothing." The realtor slammed the file drawer

and twisted back around. "But keep trying us. We might have something tomorrow. We're expecting some listings then."

THEY HAD BEEN married for fourteen years, living on Brooklyn's south slope for almost ten. It was a neighborhood once so Irish that even as late as the fifties, kids had played soccer in the street and shouted in Gaelic. When she and Rudy first moved in, the area was full of Italian men who barely knew Italian and leaned out of the windows of private clubs, shouting "How aw ya?" Now Hispanic girls in bright leotards gathered on the corner after school, smoking cigarettes and *scorning* the streets. *Scorning*, said the boys. Artists had taken up residence, as well as struggling actors, junkies, desperate Rosies in the street. *Watch out*, went the joke, *for the struggling actors*.

Mamie and Rudy's former beauty parlor now had a padlocked door and boarded front windows. Inside remained the original lavender walls, the gold metallic trim. They had built a loft at one end of the place, and at the other were bookcases, easels, canvases, and a drawing table. Stacked against the wall by the door were Rudy's huge paintings of snarling dogs and Virgin Marys. He had a series of each, and hoped, before he died, *before I shoot myself in the head on my fortieth birthday*, to have a gallery. Until then he painted apartments or borrowed money from Mamie. He was responsible for only one bill—utilities—and on several occasions had had to rush out to intercept Con Ed men arriving with helmets and boots to disconnect the electricity. "Never a dull moment," Rudy would say, thrusting cash into their hands. Once he had tried to pay the bill with two small still lifes.

"You don't think about the real world, Rudy. There's a real world out there." There was in him, she felt, only a fine line between insanity and charm. "A real world about to explode."

"You don't think I worry about the world *exploding*?" His expression darkened. "You don't think I get tears in my eyes

every fucking day thinking about those Rembrandts at the Met and what's going to happen to them when it does?"

"Rudy, I went to a realtor today."

Probably in their marriage she had been too dreamy and inconsistent. For love to last, you had to have illusions or have no illusions at all. But you had to stick to one or the other. It was the switching back and forth that endangered things.

"Again?" Rudy sighed, ironic but hurt. Once love had seemed like magic. Now it seemed like tricks. You had to learn the sleight-of-hand, the snarling dog, the Hail Marys and hoops of it! Through all the muck of themselves, the times they had unobligated each other, the anger, the permitted absences, the loneliness grown dangerous, she had always returned to him. He'd had faith in that—abracadabra! But eventually the deadliness set in again. Could you live in the dead excellence of a thing—the stupid mortar of a body, the stubborn husk love had crawled from? Yes, he thought.

The television flashed on automatically, one of the government ads: pretty couples testifying to their undying devotion, undying bodies. "We are the Undying," they said, and they cuddled their children, who had freckles that bled together on the cheeks, and toys with glassy burton eyes. *Undying*, the commercials said. *Be undying*. "I can't bear it," Mamie said. "I can't bear the brother and sister of us. I can't bear the mother and son of us. I can't bear the Undying commercials. I can't bear washing my hair in dishwashing liquid, or doing the dishes in cheap shampoo, because we're too broke or disorganized or depressed to have both at the same time." Always, they'd made do. For toilet paper they used holiday-imprinted napkins—cocktail napkins with poinsettias on them. A big box of them, with a tray, had been sent to Rudy by mistake. For towels they used bath mats. For bath mats more poinsettia napkins. They bought discount soaps with sayings on the label like *Be gentle*

*and you need not be strong*. "We're camping out here, Rudy. This is camping!" She tried to appeal to something he would understand. "My work. It's affecting my work. Look at this!" and she went over to a small drawing table and held up her half-finished sketch of Squanto planting corn. She'd been attempting a nuclear metaphor: white man learning to plant things in the ground, which would later burst forth; how the white man had gotten carried away with planting. "He looks like a toad."

"He looks like a catcher for the Boston Red Sox." Rudy smiled. Would she smile? He grew mock-serious: "The faculties of discernment and generosity are always at war. You must decide whether you will be muse or artist. A woman cannot be both."

"I can't believe you," she said, staring accusingly around their apartment. "This is not life. This is something else," and the whole ill-lit place stared back at her, hurt, a dirty old beauty parlor flunking someone else's math.

"Forget this Squanto thing," he said, looking compassionate. "I've got an idea for you. I've thought about it all day: a children's book called *Too Many Lesbians*." He began motioning with his arms. "Lesbians in bushes, lesbians in trees. . . . *Find the lesbians* . . ."

"I'm going out for some air," she said, and she grabbed her coat and flew out the door. It was evening already, zinc gray and chill, the puddles freezing on the walks in a thin glaze. She hurried past the shivering Rosies at the corner, hurried six blocks in a zigzag to look at the bird feeder again. Visit a place at night, she knew, and it was yours.

When she reached it, the house was dark, holding its breath, soundless so as not to be discovered. She pressed her face against the gate, the hard cilia of its ironwork, and sighed, longing for another existence, one that belonged to a woman who lived in a house like this, the lovely brow of its mansard roof, thoughtful

with rooms. She felt a distrust of her own life, like those aerospace engineers reluctant to fly in planes of their own design, fearing death by their own claptastrophe.

The bird feeder stood tall as a constable. There were no birds.

"YOU SHOULD never leave. You just always come back," whispered Rudy. *A tourist in your own despair*, he had once said. It was the title of one of his paintings. One of a snarling dog leaping over a sofa.

She stared through the small window by their bed, a strip of sky and one dim star, an asterisk to take her away briefly to an explanation—the night bragging a footnote. He held her, kissed her. Here in bed was when he seemed to her not to be doing imitations of other people. After fifteen years, she had seen all the imitations—friends, parents, movie actors—until it was a little scary, as if he were many different people at once, people to turn to, not in distress, but like a channel on television, a mind gone crazy with cable. He was Jimmy Stewart. He was Elvis Presley. "When you were growing up, were your parents funny?" she asked him once.

"My parents? You've got to be kidding," he said. "I mean, once in a while they *memorized* something." He was Dylan on the harmonica. Lifelike; absolutely lifelike. He was James Cagney. He was some musical blend he called Smokey Robinson Caruso.

"Don't you think we'd have beautiful children?" Rudy now pleaded, sleepily, his hand smoothing the bangs off her brow.

"They'd be nervous and insane," she murmured.

"You're strung out about your health."

"But maybe they'd also be able to do imitations."

Rudy kissed her throat, her ears, her throat again. She had to spit daily into a jar she kept in the bathroom, and to visit the clinic regularly, bringing the jar.

"You think we don't love each other anymore," he said. He was capable of tenderness. Though sometimes he was rough, pressing himself upon her with a force that startled her, wanting to make love and kissing her meanly against the wall: *come on, come on*; though his paintings had grown more violent, feverish swirls of men in business suits sodomizing animals: *this is my statement about yuppies, OK?*; though in coffee shops he often lorded over her spells of sorrowful boredom by looking disgusted while she blinked soggily into her lunch—here without his clothes on, with her face open to him, he could be a tender husband. "You think that, but it's not true." Years ago she had come to know his little lies, harmless for the most part and born of vanity and doubts, and sometimes fueled merely by a desire to hide from things whose truth took too much effort to figure out. She knew the way he would tell the same anecdotes from his life, over and over again, each time a little differently, the exaggerations and contradictions sometimes having a particular purpose—his self-portrait as Undiscovered Genius—and sometimes not seeming to have one at all. "Six inches from the door was an empty shopping cart jammed up against the door," he told her once, and she said, "Rudy, how can it be six inches from the door but also jammed up against it?"

"It was full of newspapers and tin cans, stuff like that. I don't know."

She couldn't even say when the love between them had begun to sicken, how long it had been gasping drearly over its own grave of rage and obligation. They had spent over a third of their lives together—a third, like sleep. He was the only man who had ever, even once, claimed to find her beautiful. And he had struck with her, loved her, even when she was twenty and in terrified thrall to sex, not daring to move, out of politeness or was it timidity. He had helped her. Later she learned to crave the drugged heart of sex, the drugs at the core of it: All the necessary kissing and fussing seemed only that—nec-

essay—to get to the drugs. But it had all been with Rudy, always with him. “Now we are truly in cahoots,” she exulted, the day they were married at the county clerk’s.

“I don’t look good in cahoots,” he said, his arm swung loosely around. “Let’s go get tattoos.”

What kisses there were in disappointment; sorrow fueled them, pushed them to a place. The city writhed, and the world shut down all around. Rudy gave pouting mouths to his Virgin Marys, popped open cans of beer, watched old movies on TV.

*“You are happy until you say you are happy. Then you are no longer happy.* Bonnard. The great painter of happiness articulating itself to death.”

Maybe she’d thought life would provide her with something more lasting, more flattering than sexual love, but it never had, not really. For a while, she’d felt like one of the girls on the street corner: a world of leotards and drugs—drugs you hungered for and got to fast.

“Don’t you think we have a very special love?” asked Rudy. But she wasn’t believing in special love. Even when everyone was being practical, she believed—like a yearning for wind in winter—in only one kind of love, the kind in art: where you die for it. She had read too many books, said Rudy, Victorian novels where the children spoke in the subjunctive. *You take too much to heart*, he wrote her once, when she was away, living in Boston with an aging aunt and a sketch pad.

“I would never die for you,” she said softly.

“Sure you would,” said Rudy. He sighed, lay back. “Do you want a glass of water? I’ll get down and get it.”

At times her marriage seemed like a saint, guillotined and still walking for miles through the city, carrying its head. She often thought of the whole apartment going up in flames. What would she take with her? What few things would she grab for her new life? The thought exhilarated her. *You take too much to heart*.

IN THE HOUSE DREAM, she walks in past the gate and the bird feeder and knocks on the door. It opens slowly and she steps in, in and around, until it is she herself who is opening it, from the other side, wondering who has knocked.

“Death,” said Rudy again. “Death by nuclear holocaust. Everyone’s having those dreams. Except for me. I’m having these completely embarrassing nightmares about bad haircuts and not knowing anyone at a party.”

In the morning, sun spilled in through the window by the bed. There was more light in the apartment in winter when there was snow on their overhang and it reflected sunlight inward, making garnet of the rug and striping the bed. A stray tomcat they had befriended, taken in, and fed lounged on the sill. They called him Food Man or Bill of the Baskervilles, and occasionally Rudy was kind to him, lifting the cat up high so that it could check out the bookcases, sniff the ceiling, which it liked to do. Mammie put birdseed out in the snow to attract pigeons, who would amuse the cat through the glass when he was inside. Car TV. Rudy, she knew, hated pigeons, their lizard feet and pea brains, their strangely bovine meanness. He admired his friend Marco, who had put metal stakes outside on his air conditioner to keep pigeons from landing there.

Ordinarily Mammie was the first one up, the one to make coffee, the one to head cautiously down the makeshift rungs hammered in the side post, the one to pad out to the kitchen area, heat up water, rinse out mugs, brew coffee, get juice, and bring it all back to bed. This was how they had breakfast, the bedclothes a calico of spills.

But today, as on the other days he feared she would leave him, Rudy wormed naked out of the covers before her, jackknifed at the loft’s edge, descended to the floor with a thump. Mammie watched his body: lanky, big-eared; his back, his arms, his hips. No one ever talked about a man’s hips, the hard twin

saddles of them. He put on a pair of boxer shorts. "I like these underwear," he said. "They make me feel like David Niven."

He made coffee from water they stored in a plastic garbage barrel. They had it delivered this way, weekly, like seltzer, and they paid twenty dollars for it. They washed dishes in the water that came through the faucets, and they even took quick showers in it, though they risked rashes, said the government doctors. Once Mammie hadn't heard a special radio warning and had taken a shower, scrubbing hard with an old biscuit of loofah, only to step out with burning welts on her arms and shoulders: There had been a chemical pumped into the water, she learned later, one thought to impede the growth of viruses from river-rat fleas. She had soothed her skin with mayonnaise, which was all they had, and the blisters peeled open to a pink ham flesh beneath.

Except for the pleasure of Rudy bringing her coffee—the gift of it—she hated this place. But you could live with a hate. She had. It was so powerful, it had manners; it moved to one side most of the time to let you pass. It was mere dislike that clouded and nagged and stepped in front of your spirit, like a child wanting something.

Rudy returned with the coffee. Mammie rolled to the bed's edge and took the poinsetta tray from him, as he climbed back up and over her. "It's the Coffee Man," she said, trying to sound cheerful, perhaps even to chirp. Shouldn't she try? She placed the tray between them, picked up her coffee, and sipped. It was funny: With each swallow she could recast this fetid place, resee it with a caffeinated heart's eye, make it beautiful even. But it would be the drizzle of affection felt for a hated place before you left it. And she would leave. Again. She would turn the walls and sinks and the turpentine dust to a memory, make it the scene of mild crimes, and think of it with a false, willowy love.

But then you could get to calling everything false and wil-

lowy and never know anymore what was true and from the heart.

The car came and curled up next to her. She massaged the cool, leathery wafers of its ear and plucked dust from its whiskers. He cocked his head and closed his eyes sleepily, content. How sad, she thought, how awful, how fortunate to be an animal and mistake grooming for love.

She placed a hand on Rudy's arm. He bent his head to kiss it, but then couldn't bend that far without spilling his coffee, and so straightened up again.

"Are you ever lonely?" Mammie asked him. Every moment of a morning seemed battled for, the past and future both seeking custody. She laid her cheek against his arm.

"Mammie," he said softly, and that was all.

In the last five years almost all of their friends had died.

*The Indians weren't used to the illnesses that the English brought with them to the new world. Many Indians got sick. When they got chicken pox or mumps, they sometimes died. A very proud Indian might happen to wake up one morning and look in the mirror he'd gotten from an English trader and see red spots polka-dotted his face! The proud Indian would be very upset. He might hurl himself against a tree to maim himself. Or he might throw himself over a cliff or into a fire (picture).*

THE AGENT had on a different scarf today—a turquoise jacquard, twisted into a long coil that she wore wrapped around her neck like a collar. "A room," she said quickly. "Would you settle for a room?"

"I'm not sure," said Mammie. When she spoke with someone snappy and high-powered like that, she felt depressed and under siege.

"Well, come back when you are," said the agent, in her chair, trundling toward the files.



Mamie took the train into Manhattan. She would walk around the art galleries in SoHo, after she dropped off a manuscript at the McWilliams Company. Then she would come back home via the clinic. She had her glass jar in her purse.

In the McWilliams bathroom was a secretary named Goz, whom Mamie had spoken to a few times. Goz was standing in front of the mirror, applying eye makeup. "Hey, how ya doin'?" she said, when she saw Mamie.

Mamie stood next to her, washed her face off from the subway, and dug through her purse for a hairbrush. "I'm OK. How are you?"

"All right." Goz sighed. She had two wax perfume wands, mascara, and several colors of eye shadow spread out on the mirror ledge. She scrutinized her own reflection and sucked in her cheeks. "You know, it's taken me years to get my eye makeup to look like this."

Mamie smiled sympathetically. "A lot of practice, huh."

"No—years of *eye makeup*. I let it build up."

Mamie leaned over and brushed her hair upside down.

"Hmmm," said Goz a little irritably. "What have you been doing these days?"

"Oh, a children's thing again. It's the first time I've done the pictures *and* the text." Mamie straightened and threw her head back. "I'm, um, dropping off a chapter for Seth today." Her hair fell around her face in a penumbra. She looked insane.

"Oh. Hmmm," said Goz. She was watching Mamie's hair with interest. "I like *neat* hair. I don't think a woman should look as if sex has already happened."

Mamie smiled at her. "How about you? You going out a lot, having fun?"

"Yeah," said Goz a little defensively. Everyone these days was defensive about their lives. Everyone had settled. "I'm going out. I'm going out with this *man*. And my friends are going out with these *men*. And sometimes we all go out together. The

trouble is we're all about thirty years younger than these guys. We'll go to a restaurant or something and I'll look around the table and like every man at our table is thirty years older than his date."

"A father-daughter banquet," said Mamie, trying to joke. "We used to have those at our church."

Goz stared at her. "Yeah," she said, finally turning to put away all her makeup. "You still with that guy who lives in a beauty parlor?"

"Rudy. My husband."

"Whatever," said Goz, and she went into a stall and closed the door.

*None of the English seemed to be getting sick. This caused much whispering in the Indian villages. "We are dying," they said. "But they are not. How come?"*

*And so the chief, weak and ailing, would put on English clothes and go to the Englishmen (picture).*

"THIS IS for Seth Billers," Mamie said, handing the receptionist a large manila envelope. "If he has any questions, he can just phone me. Thanks." She turned and fled the building, taking the stairs rather than the elevator. She never liked to meet with Seth. He tended to be harried and abstracted, and they worked just as well together on the phone. "Mamie? Great stuff," he liked to say. "I'm sending the manuscript back with my suggestions. But ignore them." And always the manuscript arrived three weeks later with comments in the margin like *Oh please* and *No shit*.

She bought a paper and walked downtown toward some galleries she knew on Grand Street, stopping at a coffee shop on Lafayette. Usually she ordered a cup of coffee *and* a cup of tea, as well as a brownie, propping up her sadness with chocolate and caffeine so that it became an anxiety.

"You want something or nothing?" the waitress asked her.

"What?" Startled, Mamie ordered the Slenderella.

"Good choice," said the waitress, as if it had been a test, and then hurried to the kitchen in a pained jog.

Mamie spread the paper out at a diagonal and read, the pages stoically full of news of the war in India and, locally, of the women's bodies dredged up weekly from the Gowanus Canal. Disappeared women, with contusions. Beaten and drowned. Secretaries, students, a Rosie or two.

The Slenderella came with egg salad, and she ate it slowly, dissolving it in her mouth, its moist, mothering yellow. On the obituary page there were different deaths, young men, as in a war, and always the ending: *He is survived by his parents.*

Leaving the paper on the table as a tip, she spent the rest of the morning wandering in and out of galleries, looking at paintings that seemed much worse to her than Rudy's. Why these and not her husband's? Painting pictures was the only thing he had ever wanted to do, but no one was helping him. Age had already grabbed him in the face: His cheeks sagged houndshily, his beard was shot with white. Bristly hairs sprouted like wheat from his ears. She used to go with him to art openings, listening to people say bewildering things like "Syntax? Don't you just love *syntax*?" or "Now you know why people are starving in India—we had to wait an hour for our biriyani!" She began to leave early—while he lingered there, dressed in a secondhand pair of black leather pants he looked terrible in, chatting up the dealers, the famous, the successful. He would offer to show them his slides. Or he would go into his rap about Theoretical Disaster Art, how if you can depict atrocities, you can prevent them. "Anticipate, and imitate," he said. "You can preclude and dispirit a holocaust by depriving it of its originality; enough books and plays and paintings, you can change history by getting there first."

One East Village dealer looked him heavily in the eye and

said, "You know, in a hive, when a bee has something to communicate, it does a dance. But if the bee does not stop dancing, the others sting it to death," and the dealer then turned and started talking to someone else.

Rudy always walked home alone, slow across the bridge, his life exactly the same as it was. His heart, she knew, was full of that ghetto desire to leap from poor to rich with a single, simple act, that yearning that exhausted the poor—something the city required: an exhausted poor. He would comb the dumpsters for clothes, for artbooks, for pieces of wood to build into frames and stretchers, and in the early hours of the morning he would arrive home with some huge dried flower he had scavenged, a wobbly plant stand, or a small, beveled mirror.

At noon, without an apartment to paint, he might go into the city, to the corner of Broadway and Wall, to play his harmonica for coins. Sea chanteys and Dylan. Sometimes passersby would slow down on "Shenandoah," which he played so mournfully that even what he called "some plagiarist of living," in a beige all-weather coat, "some guy who wears his asshole on his sleeve," might stop on his lunch hour to let a part of himself leap up in the hearing, in communion, in reminder of times left behind. But mostly, everyone just sailed past, tense with errands, stubbing their feet on the shoe box Rudy'd placed on the sidewalk for contributions. He did not play badly. And he could look as handsome as an actor. But mad—something there in the eyes. Madmen, in fact, were attracted to him, came bounding up to him like buddies, shouting psychotically, shaking his hand and putting their arms around him while he played.

But people with money wouldn't give it to a guy with a harmonica. A guy with a harmonica had to be a drinker. To say nothing of a guy with a harmonica wearing a T-shirt that read: *Wino Cogito: I Think Therefore I Drink*. "I forget some-times," said Rudy, unconvincingly. "I forget and wear that

shirt." People with money would spend six dollars on a cocktail for themselves, but not eighty cents toward a draft beer for a guy with a shirt like that. Rudy would return home with enough cash for one new brush, and with that new brush would paint a picture of a bunch of businessmen sodomizing farm animals. "The best thing about figure painting," he liked to say, "is deciding what everyone will wear."

On days when he and his friend Marco got apartment-painting work, they would make real money, tax free, and treat themselves to Chinese food. They called their housepainting partnership We Aim for the Wall, and as a gimmick they gave out balloons. On these occasions rich people liked them—"Hey, where's my balloon, guys?"—until they discovered liquor missing or unfamiliar long-distance calls on their phone bills. As a result, referrals were rare.

And now something was happening to him. At night, even more than before, he would push her, force her, and she was growing afraid of him. *I love you*, he would murmur. *If only you knew how much*. He'd grip her painfully at the shoulders, his mouth tight on hers, his body hurting her. In museums and galleries he quietly mocked her opinions. "You don't know anything about art," he would say, scornfully shaking his head, if she liked something by someone who wasn't Rembrandt, someone he felt competitive with, someone his own age, someone who was a woman.

She began going alone, as now, whizzing around the gallery partitions and then stopping, long, in front of a piece she liked, one that pulled her in and danced a little before letting her go. She liked scenes, something with water and a boat, but she rarely found any. Mostly there was only what she called Warning Label art: *Like Man*, said one. *Love Hate*, said another.

Or she would go to a movie. A boy with a plate in his head falls in love with a girl who spurns him. He kidnaps her, feeds her, then kills her by opening up her skull to put a plate in

there, too. He props her up in a chair and paints watercolors of her in the nude.

On the subway back, in the afternoon, every beggar seemed to her to have Rudy's face, turning, leering. They would come upon her suddenly, sit next to her and belch, take out a harmonica and play an old folk tune. Or sit far away and just look. She would glance up, and every bum in the car would have his stare, persistent as pain.

She got off at Fourth Avenue and dropped her jar off at the clinic.

"We'll reemail you the results," said a young man in a silvery suit, a technician who eyed her warily.

"All right," she said.

To console herself she went to a shop around the corner and tried on clothes. She and Rudy used to do this sometimes, two young poor people, posing in expensive outfits, just to show the other what they would look like *if only*. They would step out of the dressing rooms and curtsy and bow, exasperating the salesperson. Then they would return all the clothes to the racks, go home, make love. Once, before he left the store, Rudy pulled a formal suit off the rack and screamed, "I don't go to these places!" That same night, in the throes of a nightmare, he had groped for the hatchet beneath him and raised it above her, his mouth open, his eyes gone. "Wake up," she'd pleaded, and squeezed his arm until he lowered it, staring emptily at her, confusion smashed against recognition, a surface broken for air.

"COME HERE," Rudy said, when she got home. He had made a dinner of fruit and spinach salad, plus large turkey drumsticks that had been on sale—a Caveman Special. He was a little drunk. The painting he had been working on, Mammie could see now, was of a snarling dog *leaping upon* a Virgin Mary, tearing at her lederhosen—not a good sign. Next to the canvas, cockroaches were smashed on the floor like maple creams.

"I'm tired, Rudy," she said.

"Come on." The cabbagey rot of his one bad molar drifted toward her like a cloud. She moved away from him. "After dinner I want you to go for a walk with me, then. At least." He belched.

"All right." She sat down at the table and he joined her. The television was on, a rerun of *Last for Life*, Rudy's favorite movie.

"What a madman, Van Gogh," he drawled. "Shooting himself in the stomach. Any sane person would shoot themselves in the head."

"Of course," said Mamie, staring into the spinach leaves; orange sections lay dead on the top like goldfish. She chewed on the turkey leg, which was gamy and dry. "This is delicious, Rudy." *Any sane person would shoot themselves in the head.* For dessert there was a candy bar, split in two.

They went out. It was dusk, the sun not setting as quickly as in January, when it descended fast as a window shade, but now slowing a little, a lingering, hesitant light. A black eye yellowing. They walked together down the slope toward South Brooklyn, into the streak of orange that would soon be night. They seemed somehow to be racing one another, first one of them slightly ahead, then the other. They passed the old brick row homes, the St. Thomas Aquinas Church, the station stop for the F train and the G, that train that went nowhere, it was said, because it went from Brooklyn to Queens, never to Manhattan; no one was ever on it.

They continued walking beneath the el. A train roared deafeningly above them. The streetlights grew sparse, the houses smaller, fenced and slightly collapsed, like the residents of an old folks' home, waiting to die and staring. What stores there were were closed and dark. A skinny black Labrador in front of one of them sniffed at some bags of garbage, nuzzled them as if they were dead bodies that required turning to reveal the

murder weapon, the ice pick in the back. Rudy took Mamie's hand. Mamie could feel it—hard, scaly, chapped from turpentine, the nails ridged as seashells, the thumbs blackened by accidents on the job, dark blood underneath, growing out. "Look at your hands," said Mamie, stropping and holding his hand under a streetlight. There was melted chocolate still on his palm, and he pulled it away self-consciously, wiped it on his coat. "You should use some lotion or something, Rudy. Your hands are going to fall off and land on the sidewalk with a big clank."

"So don't hold them."

The Gowanus Canal lay ahead of them. Already the cold sour smell of it, milky with chemicals, blew onto their faces. "Where are we going, anyway?" she asked. A man in a buttonless coat approached them from the bridge, then crossed and kept walking. "This is a little weird, isn't it, being out here at this hour?" They had come to the drawbridge over the canal and stopped. It was strange, this toxic little vein, strange to stand above it, looking down at night, in a dangerous neighborhood, as if they were in love and entangled to such adventures. Sometimes it seemed she and Rudy were two people attempting to tango, sweating and trying, long after the orchestra had grown tired, long after everyone else had gone home.

Rudy leaned his arms on the railing of the bridge, and another train roared over them, an F train, with its raspberry-pink square. "This is the highest elevated in the city," he said, though the train was drowning him out.

Once the train had passed, Mamie murmured, "I know." When Rudy started giving tours of Brooklyn like this, she knew something was the matter.

"Don't you bet there are bodies in this water? Ones the papers haven't notified us of yet? Don't you bet that there are mobsters, and molls, and just the bodies of women that men never learned to love?"

"Rudy, what are you saying?"

"I'll bet there are more bodies here," he said, and for a moment Mamie could see the old familiar rage in his face, though it flew off again, like a bird, and in that moment there seemed nothing on his face at all, a station between trains, until his features pitched suddenly inward, and he began to cry into the sleeves of his coat, into his hard, gravelly hands.

"Rudy, what is it?" She stood behind him and held him, put her arms around his waist, her cheek against his back. There had been times he had consoled her this way, times when he had simply rubbed her back and connected her again to something: Those times when it seemed she'd floated off and was living far away, he had been like a medium calling her from the dead. "Here we are in the Backrub Cave," he'd said, hovering above her, the quilt spread over them both in a small, warm hut, all the ages of childhood returning to her with his hands. Life was long enough so that you could keep re-learning things, think and feel and realize again what you used to know.

He coughed and didn't turn around. "I want to prove to my parents I'm not a fuck-up." Once, when he was twelve, his father had offered to drive him to Andrew Wyeth's house. "You wanna be an artist, dontcha, son? Well, I found out where he lives!"

"It's a little late to be worrying about what our parents think of us," she said. Rudy tended to cling to things that were beside the point—the point was always too frightening. Another train roared by, and the water beneath them watted up sour and sulfuric. "What is it, really, Rudy? What is it you fear?"

"The Three Stooges," he said. "Poverty, Obscurity, Masturbation. Also the three E's. Ennu. Anomie. Misery. Give me one good reason why we should go on living." He was shouting.

"Sorry," she sighed. She pulled away from him, brushed

something from his coat. "You've caught me on a bad day." She searched his profile for an emotion, one that had found dress but not weapons. "I mean, it's life or nothing, right? You don't have to love it, you only have to—" She couldn't think of what.

"We live in a terrible world," he said, and he turned to look at her, wistful and in pain. She could smell that acrid, animal smell hot under his arms. He could smell like that sometimes, like a crazy person. One time she mentioned it, and he went immediately to perfume himself with her bath powder, coming to bed smelling like her. Another time, mistaking the container, he sprinkled himself all over with Ajax.

"Happy Valentine's Day."

"Yes," she said, fear thick in her voice. "Can we go back now?"

*He would sit among them with great dignity and courtesy. "You must pray to his god of yours that keeps you so well. You must pray to him to let us live. Or, if we are to die, let us then go live with your god so that we too may know him." There was silence among the Englishmen. "You see," added the chief, "we pray to our god, but he does not listen. We have done something to offend." Then the chief would stand, go home, remove his English clothes, and die (picture).*

GOZ WAS IN the ladies' room again, and she smiled as Mamie entered. "Going to ask me about my love life?" she said, flossing her teeth in front of the mirror. "You always do."

"All right," said Mamie. "How's your love life?"

Goz sawed back and forth with the floss, then tugged it out. "I don't have a love life. I have a like life."

Mamie smiled. She thought how nice that might be, to be peacefully free from love—love and its desire for itself—a husband and wife like two army buddies with stories and World Series bets.

"It's pure, it's stripped, it's friendly. Coffee and dispassion. You should try it." She ducked into one of the stalls and locked it. "Nothing is safe anymore," she called out from inside.

MAMIE LEFT, went to a record store, and bought records. No one had been buying them for years now, and you could get them for seventy-five cents. She bought only albums that had a song with the word *heart* in the title: *The Vernacular Heart*, *Heric Heart*, *A Heart Is Just a Bicycle Behind Your Rib*. Then she had to leave. Outside the dizzying heat of the store, she clutched them to her chest and walked, down through the decaying restaurant smells of Chinatown toward the Brooklyn Bridge. The sidewalks were fetid and wet, and the day was warm, as if spring had already come. Everyone was out walking. She would stop at the clinic on the way home and drop off her jar.

She thought of a dream she had had the night before. In the dream a door in the apartment opened up and suddenly there were more rooms, rooms she hadn't known existed, a whole house beneath, which was hers. There were birds living inside, and everything was very dark but beautiful, room after room, with windows open for the birds. On the walls were needlepoint samplers that read: *Die Here*. The real estate agent with the scarf kept saying, "In this day and age" and "It's a steal." Goz was there, her blond hair tipped in red and growing dark roots. Tricolor like candy corn. "Just us girls," she kept saying. It was the end of the world, and they were supposed to live there together, as long as it took to die, until their gums felt strange and they got colds and lost their hair, the television all dots and snow. She remembered some sort of movement—bunched and panicky, through stairwells, corridors, dark tunnels hidden behind paintings—and then, in the dream, it untangled to a fluttering stasis.

When she reached the bridge, she noticed some commotion, a disturbance up ahead, halfway across. Two helicopters were

circling in the sky, and there was a small crowd at the center of the pedestrian walk. A fire truck and a police car whizzed by beneath her on the right, lights flashing. She walked to the edge of the crowd. "What is it?" she asked a man.

"Look." He pointed toward another man, who had climbed out over the iron mesh and crossbeams, out to the far railing of the bridge. His wrists were banded in black, and his hands held on to the suspension cables. His back arched and his body swayed out over the water below, as if caught in a web of steel parallelograms. His head dangled like someone crucified, and the wind tore through his hair. In the obscured profile, she thought she could make out the features.

"Oh, my God," she said.

"The woman in front of us says he's the guy wanted for the Gowanus Canal murders. See the police boats circling down there?" Two red-and-white speedboats were churning up water.

One of the helicopters hovered noisily above.

"Oh, my God," Mamie said again, and pushed her way through the crowd. A white heat burst in her brain. A police motorbike pulled up on the walkway behind her. A policeman with pistols got off. "It's someone I know," Mamie repeated to people, and elbowed them aside. "It's someone I know." She held her purse and bag in front of her and pushed. The policeman was following close behind, so she pressed hard. When she came to the place directly across from the man, she put down her things and lifted her knee up onto the rail, swung her leg over, and began to crawl, metal to skin, toward the outer reaches of the bridge. "Hey!" someone shouted. The policeman. "Hey!" Cars sped beneath her, and an oceanic wind rushed into her mouth. She tried not to look down. "Rudy!" she called out, but it seemed feeble in the roar, her throat a half throat. "It's me!" She felt surrounded by sky, moving toward it, getting closer. Her nails broke against metal. She *was* getting closer, close enough, soon, to grab him, to talk to him, to take his

face in her hands and say something about *let's go home*. But then suddenly, too far from her, he relinquished his grip on the cables and fell, turning, his limbs like a windmill, vanishing into the East River below.

She froze. *Rudy*. Two people screamed. There was a whirring noise from the crowd behind her, people pressed to the railings. *No, not this*. "Excuse me, m'am," shouted a voice. "Did you say you knew this man?"

She inched backward on her knees, lowered herself to the walkway. Her legs were scraped and bleeding, but she didn't feel them. Someone was touching her, clamping hands around her arms. Her purse and bag were still where she'd left them, leaning against the cement, and she jerked free, grabbed them, and began to run.

She ran the rest of the way across the bridge, down into the ammonia dank of a passageway, then up again to an old ruined park, zigzagging through the fruit streets of the Heights—Cranberry, Pineapple—along the hexagonal cobbles of the promenade, along the water, and then up left, in a ricochet against the DON'T WALK lights. She did not stop running even when she found herself in Carroll Gardens, heading toward the Gowanus Canal. *No, not this*. She ran up the slope of South Brooklyn for twenty minutes, through traffic, through red lights and sirens, beneath the scary whoop of helicopters and a bel-lowing plane, until she reached the house with the bird feeder, and when she got there, scarcely able to breathe, she sank down on the concrete lip of its fence and let out a cry, solitary and strangled, into her bag of songs.

THE AFTERNOON DARKENED. Two Rosies shuffled by, ignoring her, but slowing down, winded. They, too, decided to sit on the low wall of the fence, but chose to do so at some distance. She had already slid into the underclass of the sick, she knew, but they didn't recognize her yet. "Are you OK?"

she heard one Rosie say to the other, putting her box of flowers down on the sidewalk.

"I'm OK," said her friend.

"You look worse."

"Maybe," she sighed. "The thing is you never know why you're any particular place. You get up, you move. You keep thinking there's some other way than this."

"Look at *her*," snorted the friend, motioning toward Mamie.

"What?" said the other, and then they fell silent.

A fire truck clanged by. Sirens wailed in outrage. After some time Mamie got up, slow as an arthritic, clurching only her purse—her jar still in it—leaving the records behind. She began to walk, stumbling on a raised crack in the pavement. And she noticed something: The house with the bird feeder didn't have a cupola at all. It didn't even have a bird feeder. It simply had a sign that said RESTAURANT, and there was a pigeon on it.

She walked by the Rosies and gave them a dollar for an iris.

"My," said the one handing it to her.

At the apartment, the lights were on and the padlock hung open like a hook. She stood for a moment, then kicked at the door with her foot, banging the inside knob against the wall. There was no other sound, and she hesitated there in the doorway, a form of desire, a hovering thing that cannot enter a room. But slowly she took a step, the heel of her hand pressed to the doorjamb to steady her.

He was there, hair dry, wearing different clothes. His arms were raised over his head, the stray tom like a mast in his hands on top. He was moving slowly around the place, as if in a deep Oriental exercise or a dance, the cat investigating the bookshelves.

"It's you," Mamie said, frozen by the open door.

The pumpkin stench of the bathroom wafted toward her. The uriney cold rushed in from behind, carrying with it the flap

of helicopters. He turned to see her, brought the cat down to his chest. "Hi." He was chewing on a difficult bit of candy, pieces of it stuck in his teeth. He pointed to his cheek, grinning. "Jujubes," he said. "They play with your mind."

The television burst on: people chanting together, like an anthem for cola. *We are the Undying. We are . . .*

He turned away and lifted the cat up high again, close to the golden moldings of the ceiling. "Cars love this," he said. His arms were long and tireless. In the reach, his shirt had come untucked, and the soft bare skin of his waist flashed like a smile. "Where have you been?"

There was only this world, this looted, ventriloquized earth. If one were to look for a place to die, mightn't it be here?—like some old lesson of knowing your kind and returning. She was afraid, and the afraid, she realized, sought opportunities for bravery in love. She tucked the flower in her blouse. Life or death. Something or nothing. *You want something or nothing?*

She stepped toward him with a heart she'd someday tear the terror from.

Here. But not now.