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Leaving Limbo

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Leaving Limbo

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

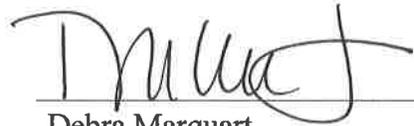
Martha McSweeney Brower

2018

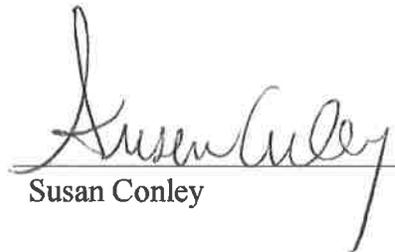
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
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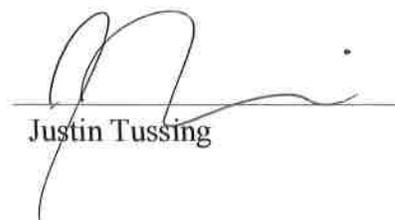
We hereby recommend that the thesis of Martha McSweeney Brower entitled *Leaving Limbo* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts



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Susan Conley Reader



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Accepted



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Abstract

The author was a disoriented voiceless adolescent during the year and a half that her mother was dying. She needed to do something hard to pull herself out of depression and to winch herself back up to life, so she decided to ride her bicycle to Canada. She left her family behind at the worst possible time, but knew she had to do it, no matter what others outside her family thought of her. After the worst and best summer of her life, she found that she really did have the strength inside of herself to live the rest of her life without her mother. Years later, when faced with the same deadly illness her mother had had, she knew where her power was. She had the voice to speak up to the medical professionals who insisted there was nothing wrong with her, but she trusted herself now to know otherwise.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Debra Marquart for her encouragement and for relieving me of the fears I had in working on my thesis. Thank you to Susan Conley for her belief in me, too.

I am grateful to my two younger sisters, Andrea and Terese, who have encouraged me all along. They have both been willing readers offering gentle feedback. They have given their ideas and suggestions, some of which I've taken and some of which were to protect my brother, I knew. I've tried to tell the good and the not-so-good about all of the characters, including myself. We all have a shadow side.

To my dear friend, Bob Wightman. You've been my cheerleader and biggest fan since we were eighteen. You have taught me more than you ever know by your artistic spirit and joyful way of living your life.

My cherished posse of eight women, who meet with me regularly and have dared me to do this and encouraged me when I started to feel like quitting—I love each of you. Rita, Pauline, Debbie, Susan, Cathy, Anne, and last but certainly not least—Maureen, who challenged me on several occasions, especially getting my MFA. I surprised myself by rising to each of those. To my “Sis,” Wendelanne, who checks in and encourages me, too. I treasure our friendship and all of the Christmases we've shared.

To my children, Jesse, Lucas, and Isaac. Your faith in me and your encouragement means the world. I know you'll be at the finish line with bottles of water like you always have.

To Reade, my sweet husband. I know that you will be there at the finish line, too, with your ever-open forgiving arms. I love you and the miracle that brought me to you.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---------------------|-----|
| Preface | 1 |
| Leaving Limbo | 13 |
| Part One | 15 |
| Part Two | 61 |
| Part Three | 97 |
| Part Four | 141 |
| Bibliography | 165 |

Preface

For decades I've been toying around this story and finally I'm writing it down. It is about a set of circumstances in my adolescence that shaped me. I knew that if I didn't write them down before I die, I'd be on my hands and knees begging God for more time on earth to do so. And I'd be apologizing for all of the time I had wasted thinking about it instead of doing it.

But like the chicken in the cashew chicken recipe I make and the steak in the teriyaki steak dish that my son showed me how to make after working in a supermarket one summer, the meat of this story has had to marinate for a long time before I could put it in writing.

For years, I toyed with the idea of joining a writing group because I needed some skills to get my story down on paper, and eventually I found some inspiring fellow writers. Then my friend Maureen challenged me to apply to the Stonecoast graduate writing program. This same friend dared me to run a marathon when I was fifty-six years old, which I did. But school terrified me and going to graduate school was much scarier than running twenty-six miles, because I believed that it was something I was incapable of doing mostly because memories of Sacred Heart School in the 1950's and 60's were still vivid with the poor deranged nuns who were assigned to the daunting tasks of teaching fifty-four children seated at desks and chairs bolted-to-the-floor of each classroom. These nuns were given an impossible job, so out of anger and frustration they stripped us of any remnants of self-esteem we might have been God-given in the first place. I have the distinct memory of Sister Ninon saying as loud as she possibly could to

a class of fifty-four pimple-faced sixth graders, “You’re not worthy. To Kiss. God’s. Feet. You hear me?! You’re not worthy.”

I spent years in therapy trying to replace that voice in my head.

Not all of the nuns were like that, though. A few of them appear in my story as some of the kindest people of my youth who made a big positive difference. Many of the Sisters of Saint Joseph were benevolent and caring. Others were simply over-worked and stressed-out women.

So school made me fearful.

My life might have gone in an entirely different direction had I not gotten into the only college that would accept me, Massachusetts College of Art in 1969. Perhaps I’d be working in Woolworth’s pouring coffee at the lunch counter until all of the Five-and-Dime stores folded entirely. Or I’d still be a salesgirl standing at the cash register bagging expensive goods for college girls whose parents taught them how to use a checkbook.

Those jobs might have been my only prospects. But Massachusetts College of Art in Boston accepted me, despite most of my high school report cards having all D’s on them. The only exceptions were the B’s for “Is Courteous.” The extra comment on the bottom of every single report card from first grade to twelfth grade at Sacred Heart School read something like, “Looks out the window too much.”

Leaving Limbo is about how I came out of the childhood shell that encapsulated me. I was painfully shy as a girl with my head hanging towards the floor all the time, convinced that I was not only homely, but stupid, too. Not until the crisis of the impending death of my mother did I realize that if I didn’t make a change in myself, I

wouldn't survive. I had to find the capacity to reverse all of the negative skills I had learned growing up in a Catholic family and a Catholic school.

When I was a kid in the 1950's, Catholicism was a sandbox religion where both adults and children were considered ignorant individuals who needed guidance for everything. We were under the thumb of the church, incapable of thinking for ourselves, so rules were to be followed or we'd end up in purgatory or even worse, hell. At the very least we Catholics had escaped Limbo, that ethereal airless realm where unbaptized souls suspend in no-man's territory, endlessly floating underwater, never to touch the bottom or the surface. At least we baptized Catholics wouldn't go to Limbo.

We grew up being told all that. So did our parents. We were told not to read the Bible on our own because, *God forbid*, we could interpret it the wrong way. The Masses were all in Latin for the greater part of my parents lives and until I was halfway through high school. We were to do everything we were told under the threat of spending eternity in the burning flames of everlasting hell where we could not even have a sip of water to quench our never-ending thirst. We would go to a place where we would never even think of the people we loved while on earth, let alone see them again or ever have a chance to escape the heat. Our soul was like a giant blotter on our insides that had some small dots here and there where the venial sins that we committed would make a washable stain. But, *God forbid*, we committed a mortal sin because that was a sin that could never be erased and would permanently remain on our souls like a deep scar.

After receiving that information in second grade, I excused myself from Sister Meltherese's class and hurried downstairs to the girl's pink lavatory in the basement of Sacred Heart School and closed myself in one of the pink metal stalls for privacy. I lifted my maroon uniform to see if I really did have a huge blotter on me and when I didn't find

one with little watered-down inky circles of venial sins on it, I thought it must be under my skin where I couldn't see it. Only God knew it was there and unless I went to confession, the charcoal-colored marks would never go away.

Every two weeks our class went to confession together at Sacred Heart School. We'd sit together in the pews of the church, where one after the other of us would take turns entering a curtained stall on either side of a door where the priest was hiding.

I had all my sins lined up before even going in because I confessed the same sins over and over:

- 1- forgot to bring a hat to church and wore a Kleenex on my head held down with a bobby pin,
- 2- talked in church, and
- 3- fought with my brothers and sisters.

That was all I could think of saying to the priest in the dark confessional that smelled like dust and incense.

Once in there, as soon as you kneeled on the wooden step inside, your knees pressed on a hidden button in the kneeler, and a red light glowed above the heavy drape outside so no one would walk in while you were confessing about not wearing a hat. The priest would slide a little window to the side in the dark of the stall where a musty screen separated his silhouette from the sinners. His head was bowed in the shadows while his thumb and index finger rested on the bridge of his nose.

After speeding through the Act of Contrition so I wouldn't forget the words, it was over. The priest aimed the sign of the cross towards me through the screen and I rose from the kneeler as the click of the red light changed to green above the confessional curtain, signaling the next sinner to enter. Then I headed for the altar rail to kneel and say

the prayers of penance that the priest told me to say. Those prayers would erase the sins from my slate-blackboard-of-a-soul.

That's how I grew up thinking that I was under the thumb of everyone else except me. And when the time came for our mother to float away from us, which she had been doing for a long time, I needed to find something inside myself to help me stop being so afraid and shy and take some chances.

In *Leaving Limbo* I portray the frightened girl I was, and the unexpected circumstance that came along that I saw as a ticket to change—a ticket to move forward and find whatever it was that I needed to do that. One of seven kids in my family, I knew that I needed something more than what I was taught. And I had to find it out for myself. On my own power. No one was going to help me.

The characters in the beginning of *Leaving Limbo* include my family members, the nuns in school, some relatives who hurt me deeply and other relatives who gave me a lifeline to better self-esteem. One character whom I hadn't heard from for years re-appeared after I had been writing about her for months and had submitted forty pages to the workshop that included her, to be critiqued by my fellow MFA graduate students. At the end of that residency after bidding our goodbyes, I was packing up my things when I heard the “ping” of my cellphone indicating a Facebook message. It was from this character that I hadn't heard from for forty-six years. She was wondering if I wanted to get together again. I must have written her right back into existence because she was part of my story.

A number of friends enjoy hearing me tell them stories and they've said more than once,

“You need to write these down, Martha. Tell us about the time you went to El Salvador and ate a mysterious piece of meat that was as tough as the sole of a shoe,” Or “Tell us about the time you and your sister rented the horse and wagon for a week in Ireland when you knew nothing about horses.”

And yes, I have so many stories of a girl who had no one supervising her and who survived with hardly any money or cell phone and with no one knowing who or where she was.

As I wrote I was surprised at how much anger towards my parents was dislodged as if I were a vengeful teenager. You’d think by the time that a half a century had passed, I would be over it. But I wasn’t over it, so I’m writing my way out of it. But writing my way out of it has also shown me a way out from under some of the anger.

Understanding the timeline of events in my family, an understanding that came with writing about my family, has also changed the trajectory of my story—from a story of fury to one of forgiveness and understanding towards my parents. It began when my sister copied the pages of the family Bible for me with all the dates of deaths and births of family members. As I lined up the events of my childhood and adolescence with events that were happening in my mother’s family and for my mother at that time, I experienced only compassion for her.

What I know now about heartache as an adult, compared to my vantage point as a self-centered adolescent, can only compare to the expanse across the Grand Canyon. I realize that my mother was grieving during my entire adolescence. Even before that. I had no understanding of grief and depression and how it manifests itself in someone. Especially someone who is expected to give unceasingly and to take care of an untamed

pack of teenagers. What my artist mother really needed was tenderness and understanding and I was unable to see that as a thoughtless teen.

For many high schoolers, life is a mysterious thick fog to wander through every day, not being able to see what's up ahead. Other than my warm-hearted godfather Uncle John, my Dad's brother, the only adults who acknowledged me or who asked what I thought or felt were Father Michael Doocey and Sister Faber, a priest and a nun with pure kind souls who watched out for the misfits like me. Yes, they were part of the church, but they weren't the institution. Father Doocey advised me to follow my conscience and not necessarily the rules. Sister Faber told me that God was listening, even to a girl the likes of me.

My parents did the best that they could while overwhelmed with children and deaths, especially my mother. They were both good people from huge families who lived through the Great Depression as first and second-generation European immigrants with no guidance for how to parent and scrambling just to support their families. They were fully human, and they tried to do a good job of parenting with what they knew.

I want readers to learn two things from my story. First, to believe that they can rise above difficulties in youth, and second, to follow one's intuition about what they need to do to move forward.

Two authors have been my main influence, Frank McCourt and Cheryl Strayed. I am fortunate to have seen Frank McCourt speak many years ago at the University of Massachusetts. And I attended a ten-day workshop with Cheryl Strayed several years ago.

Frank McCourt grew up under the power of the Catholic Church like I did, so when he writes about minor Catholic incidences that happened in school, church and family, I recognize them in mine, too. There was, and still is, a huge amount of negativity in the church, but there was also a richness in growing up with rituals, parables, and mystery. Frank McCourt's use of the child's voice allows us to experience his story through the wonder and naivete of a child, while he carries us along in present tense giving an immediacy to his tale.

With twelve years of parochial school, I was immersed in Catholicism completely. So many events that happened make for good stories. For instance, there were several classmates who would be kept in the confessional for extra-long periods of time while the priest yelled at them so loud that we could hear everything that he was shouting. Those same kids had my admiration because they courageously entered the confessional two weeks later with the same diabolical sins. They'd get yelled at all over again, making me wonder why they chose to make "good confessions" at all and why they didn't just skip professing the really bad stuff they kept on doing.

Then there was the holy communion that would sometimes get stuck on the roofs of our mouths. My brother Joey would be walking back to the pew from communion, wide-eyed and pointing to the roof of his mouth trying to pry it off with his tongue for twenty minutes because *God forbid* we let our teeth or fingers touch the body of Jesus. When I talk with my siblings about growing up together, we often laugh at some of the absurdities. I tell my children when they go through difficult times, "Someday you'll laugh about all of this." Frank McCourt writes with enough humor to lessen the darkness of his story. That's what I hope for in my story in order to avoid writing a laundry list of misery.

Mine was not the worst childhood. But I was shy and withdrawn with no skills to speak up for myself. It was during the cathartic experience of the summer of 1972 when I signed on to take a bike trip along the North Atlantic coast with a woman I barely knew that I learned a life-long lesson that I would draw on twenty-six years later when I faced a serious health crisis of my own. If I hadn't learned the lesson at age twenty, I would be dead right now. That summer of 1972, I learned to speak up.

When as a forty-six-year old with three young sons, I was told to “be patient and wait”—to not question authority—I knew exactly what I had to do because I was able to hear the voice that I had found when in my early twenties, and I'm alive now because I listened to it. The church dogma didn't help me. The hollering nuns and Grade-A super smart students that I revered didn't help me. My parents couldn't help me.

It was experiences with strangers I encountered or people I worked with who were probably the least likely to be listened to, but who helped me find my truth and my voice. Like the old lady on the train who muttered out loud, so a late boarding passenger would hear her, “Ever notice how people who are always late are unpopular?” Or the young woman who picked up someone else's angry screaming child at a party and wrapped him in her arms because she saw that he needed love more than discipline. Or the old man who maneuvered his way near the kitchen sink faucet where his wife had been rinsing beans. “Am I in your way?” he asked with courtesy and gentleness.

I've learned that following directions is not always the right thing to do. What's right for one person is wrong for another. In the eyes of a few people, the timing of what I did in the summer of 1972 was a bad decision. I left my family at the worst possible time, but for me I knew that it was the best decision I could have made, and I have had no

regrets as the years have gone by. I have questioned my younger siblings about it, wondering if they were affected by my decision, but they tell me that they weren't. One sister says there was nothing that I could do anyway.

One of the only problems with writing this down is that I worry about revealing some hard truths about my family. I don't want to upset anyone, yet I need to tell this the way it happened. It is my story. What I saw of my parents and some of my siblings is not how some distant family members saw them. They saw the surface. But I experienced it differently.

I don't despise Catholicism although it may seem so. I'm still Catholic and love the mysticism of the church. I learned a greater appreciation for the Blessed Mother when I didn't have my own mother to talk to, while I sobbed and rocked a screaming colicky infant in my arms for six months.

It was Saint Anthony who ushered me back to God after I had not prayed at all for years. Saint Anthony finds things, and he helped my sister and me find safe rides as we hitch-hiked all through Europe two summers after our mother died. And Saint Francis, Patron Saint of Animals, helped my two cats make their way back home. One was lost for seven days on top of someone's roof, the other lost for three weeks in the dead cold of winter.

Yes, I'm Catholic, but not a "good Catholic." I'm certain I won't make Pope Francis's A-list because I don't go to church anymore. I haven't followed the tenets that apply to Catholic women and I'll always include the underdogs, having felt on the outside often. It's the people in charge of the church that I have trouble with. Like most everything in the world, the church is ruled by the same color and gender, and because they are imperfect mortals, they make enormous boob-moves, such as the Cardinals and

Bishops who shuffled pedophiles around and marginalize women, the divorced, and the LGBTQ community. Those are humans who make cruel decisions that I'll never subscribe to.

I love most Catholic rituals, the Blessed Mother and the saints, and remain hopeful for changes before the whole church becomes irrelevant and there are no giant cathedrals to sit in and feel peace in their spaciousness. But for right now, the church has no intention of changing, so in the meantime, I'll continue to talk with God about what's right for me and I'll go to communion for the soul food when I feel the call. I'll continue to say the rosary when I hike down mountains. And I'll continue to light a candle to Saint Martha, whom I petition to help me stick to picking up the house when I make it a total shambles and I'd rather not do it at all because I don't mind mess, but for the sake of my family it has to be done.

The two authors I mentioned earlier as important influences both write about long and painful journeys. In *Angeles Ashes* Frank McCourt wrote about his journey to adulthood from a difficult childhood in Ireland. In *Wild*, Cheryl Strayed writes about the loss of her mother and the extraordinary and impulsive measures she took as a young woman to find her way through profound grief.

One of the concepts I learned from Cheryl Strayed, and what I must apply to writing this thesis, is to set aside the notion of writing a finished book and instead focus on writing page after page and do it with as much honesty as possible. It was Margaret Atwood in her poem, "Spelling," who said, "A word after a word after a word is power."

Word after word and page after page is what will eventually bring me to truth in writing my story, so I better squirrel away the idea of a finished book for right now and concentrate on sincerity. It is Strayed's deep honesty with herself that inspires me most.

What I learned while writing this memoir and what I want readers to know is that whoever it was that we were as little children—in my case, a terrified girl with no voice at all, lost in a crowd of people and feeling like a speck of sand—we don't have to stay that way. We can evolve. We can find our voice and unfold into the people we were intended to be. We can distinguish ourselves as individuals when we decide to be open to and learn from first-hand experience.

Leaving Limbo

Part One

1955

My older sister and I sit at the kitchen table by a sunny window, our elbows on the table, our feet tucked under our bottoms as we watch our mother roll pink clay without a sound. She rolls it into a long snake, then coils it into a bowl shape. The sun blankets us with calm. Like magic, the bowl grows into a little pitcher. Our mother's hands pinch a spout, then a handle. She is a silent magician for my sister and me. She doesn't talk to us, but later says, "It's a man's world," with her mouth straight and the corners of her lips pressed in. There are two babies asleep upstairs and my mother's belly is big. It's always big.

I am sitting on a rock outside facing the sun with eyes half-closed to little slits. There are rays and beams from the sun, specs floating across my eyeballs, and lines of rainbow light come and go across my squinting eyes. There are squeaks inside my head, like a door creaking. It's me growing, I just know it. I tell my mother that I can hear myself growing and she says, "No, you can't." But I can feel my fingernails growing, too, when I sit in the sun and listen.

In the house, Mum says, "Put on your shoes."

The shoes are red with buckles.

"They're on the wrong feet," she says.

I switch them around.

"No- They're on the wrong feet!"

I do it again.

"No- Do it right!"

Same thing.

“They are still on the wrong feet!”

No matter which I choose, it’s wrong.

Mum takes driving lessons from her friend Anita when she’s forty and after her sixth baby is born. This time we have to go along with her.

“I don’t want to hear a peep out of you kids,” she says as we climb into the backseat arranging three babies on the laps of us three older kids. Mum’s already taken a few lessons alone, but this day we all go with her and sit in the back. Mum is nervous and having trouble staying on the right side of the road but when it comes time to slow down and spin the steering wheel for a left turn, it’s a super wide turn that not only whips us all to the side but flings the front door open bouncing Anita out onto the road.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” Mum screams, jerking the car to a stop and then turning to us, “All of you. Stay in the car.”

We bend our heads to what’s outside the window as Mum rushes back to Anita who is lying on her side with her striped dress flipped up revealing underwear stretched over a wide bottom.

Anita gets up and brushes herself off to get back in the car. The ride directly home is silent and there are no more driving lessons. Mum must have passed the driving test but is forever an edgy and tense driver.

Mum grew up in the city where people didn’t need cars because everything was in walking distance. But now we live far from Somerville and with six kids, she is as imprisoned as a caged animal. Dad works in Boston forty-five minutes away, while she’s trapped with six kids and no car.

“It’s a man’s world,” she says to no one in particular as she stands in the driveway with Joey in a stroller, and Ellen and Andrea together in a playpen because they are only ten months apart. I drag sticks in the dirt driveway to make pictures and play in puddles. Mum looks far away with her straight lips thin and mad. Her eyebrows have two lines between them. Barry and Mary are riding bikes and trikes up and down the driveway.

1956

My father and Uncle Frank are moving furniture into rooms in the new house that echo with shiny wood floors. The air and the walls in this empty house are dusty and gray. Aunt Joan has brought the six of us kids up to the third floor to stay out of the way. Mum is rocking a baby. We range in ages from five months to seven years.

My jacket has a hood with white fake fleece inside as I walk down the street past old maple trees, cracks on the sidewalks, dog poo, past the mailbox and houses with wide lawns out front. My shoes are too small. I cross the street near the mailbox then walk by a tall hedge. I’m four years old and walking the two blocks to school with a boy named Richard. Today he sits on his front steps licking a stick of butter on a popsicle stick. We walk the rest of the way to the kindergarten together as he laps his butter pop. I don’t talk all day at school. I sit on the side of the classroom and watch everybody in a circle because the other kids are all older than I am.

After school, I walk home with Richard holding a giant piece of almost blank drawing paper with a one-inch square drawing in one corner with teeny tiny people and a teensy car. When my mother sees it, she laughs at me and says the teacher told her that it’s strange to make eensy-weensy little scenes on a giant piece of paper and I’m

ashamed.

There are so many people living in our house that no one has a key. There's always someone home. We are right near Boston College, so Dad has bought enough second-hand beds to have seven college girls come to live with us. They have the third floor to sleep in and a little kitchen in the basement to use if they don't eat out. Mum keeps a book on the hall desk that they have to sign when they come in and when they go out.

Our street is a "dual-carriageway" which is like a highway. We have strict instructions never to cross the street because of what happened when I was five.

I went to a birthday party at another big family's house directly across the street from our house. There was an exciting Hop-a-long Cassidy movie, and everything was fun until the egg salad sandwiches came out. The kids eating them had creamy yellowish mush squishing out of the sides of their mouths and one kid spit when he talked. I got dry heaves and had to get out of there fast. So, I crossed the dual carriageway alone and went home. I got spanked so hard and got such a powerful yelling-at for crossing the street, that I hid under the front porch, couching down like a statue in the leaves and pebbles.

They were calling me to come out, but I knew they would just yell at me some more. When it started to get dark, and before anyone saw me, I snuck into the house and hid behind the den door and stooped down on top of a heating grate in my party dress and "shiny shoes." I hid motionless for so long that the bottoms of my shoes got imprinted with the design of the heater on them. I missed supper and even wet into the heater instead of chancing a visit to the bathroom. My little sister Andrea finally found me at

night time, and they yelled at me all over again. Almost every day I cry and hide in secret spots, so no one will yell at me.

1957

Thirty little first grade girls in my class are standing in line with me outside the girl's pink lavatory in the basement of Sacred Heart School. There's a game going on where we have our legs spread apart and the kids are crawling through one by one. It hurts when they crawl through my legs and I want to squeeze them together instead.

Out in the school black tar parking lot, we are told, "No running," during recess. We can walk around or play jump rope if someone lets you into their game. I follow my older sister closely. She doesn't talk to me at all, but she lets me follow. Like a shadow, I stay close to her and don't talk to anyone.

Sister Rosaleen gives me Walleco candy bars and Chuckles and lets me sit at the table at the front of the classroom. I can draw all day if I want. I'm too young to be here in this class of fifty-four kids. I am five years old until the middle of January. I don't know what is going on or what she is talking about. She's nice only to me, but she yells at all of the others. She gives me paper to color anything I want. I'm quiet and never say a word as I color and draw pictures all day long while she stands at the front of the classroom.

"Do what you're told, or I'll hang you to the lights!" she screams to the other kids.

"Stop talking or I'll annihilate you!" she screams again. I doubt any of us know what that means, but we sure don't want it to happen to us.

Each of us has been given a small black box with three compartments to hold letters, numbers, and colored pegs. Sister Rosaleen stops at someone's desk, grabs the little black box and hurls it up to the ceiling. The box flies way high into the air up near the overhead lights then thuds onto the aisle littering the floor with one-inch colored sticks. The letters and numbers float slower, sprinkling the floor and wooden desks. "Now pick them up," Sister Rosaleen screeches.

A sobbing snotty nosed girl in a maroon uniform crawls on the floor, picking up the pieces of her black box with shaky hands. Sister Rosaleen does this a few times a week. One time Sister stuck her hand into Sandy D.'s desk and pulled everything out onto the floor including a rotten banana with crumpled papers. Sandy stood with her eyes and mouth open but didn't cry. Later, a messy sticky blond girl throws up next to her desk. Mr. Mackintosh, the janitor, comes in to sprinkle sawdust on it. Somebody throws up every other day. We walk around it, or if someone walks through it and tracks it down the aisle, we get yelled at. Then there are the bloody noses. Paul Dumas had them all the time without a sound. He sits in quiet with blood dripping into a maroon puddle overflowing from his desk and onto the floor. He doesn't say a word as the blood drips. "Get him outta here and bring him to the lavatory," Sister Rosaleen barks as she grabs Kevin Badger by the shoulders and shoves him and Paul out the classroom door.

To go out for a twenty-minute recess Sister Rosaleen has to recruit upper classmen to help get the fifty-four kids into snow suits. My second hand "leggings" made out of some nubby upholstery material are a little on the small side and hard to pull on. Sister Rosaleen is out of breath trying to pull them on me until I fall on the floor like a rubber girl.

“You need bigger leggings!” she says out of breath as she tugs and tugs. No wonder the nuns are yelling all the time. They were given an impossible job. Even us kids can see that.

Then I pull on my own black boots that are too big with these metal track clasps to hold them closed. They were my brother’s boots and have slits in the heels so my feet get wet anyway.

1958

It’s Fourth of July. Our mother drives us up to Uncle Carl and Aunt Bernice’s house for the big parade, the Red Man’s Band, the doll carriage parade, and the bicycle parade. He wants us to call him “CarlyBoy.” My brother Barry has decorated the wheels of his bike with red, white and blue crepe paper while my pretty sister and I have doll carriages that we’ve decorated with pink crepe paper. We have Betsy-Wetsy dolls that we got for Christmas. Betsy-Wetsy drinks from a plastic doll bottle and she wets into little doll diapers. My pretty sister and I always stay overnight for Fourth of July and Mum goes home with the other kids. We each have a “valise” that CarlyBoy bought for each of us at rummage sales, so we can stay overnight. He got one for every one of us. He also got us each a small travel sized Cepacol mouth wash.

We are walking back to the car after the parade when we hear on the loud speaker, “We have a little boy up here on the stage. He won’t tell us his name.”

We look around at our group that’s always six kids. My mother’s belly is huge. Joey’s missing. We have to walk all the way back to the stage in the park. There’s Joey crying in his little blue shorts and white t-shirt and red cap. My mother grabs his hand and we walk away.

He stops crying when we find out that Rex Trailer is nearby. We all watch Rex every Saturday on TV. CarlyBoy brings Joey and me to Rex's little trailer where we can shake his hand and look at him. He has his tan cowboy Rex Trailer suit on. He looks like my all-time hero, Davy Crocket, who wears a fringe shirt and pants just like Rex.

"Nice to meet you," Rex says to Joey and me as he shakes our hands.

After a while we walk back to my aunt and uncle's house under the shade trees along quiet Yale Avenue.

Mum gives birth to her seventh baby who weighs five pounds. We watch her walk from the car into our house holding baby Terese whose head is no bigger than an apple. I'm dressed in an argyle plaid sleeveless shirt and black pedal pusher pants. I've combed my hair to look nice for our new baby sister. Ellen is 3, Andrea is 4, Joey is 5, I'm 6, Mary is 7, and Barry is 8.

We are all quiet as Mum sits on the maroon couch in the living room holding baby Terese. She's smiling and proud. Dad's bending over the new baby with his slick-backed very black hair. We crowd around and the little kids touch her head with the gentlest touch and they whisper. The college girls come in, too, to see her. Aunt Bernice and CarlyBoy have been staying with us while Dad has been picking up Mum at Newton Wellesley hospital.

"She jumped into the world," says Mum explaining that Terese was born "feet first" instead of head first.

There's been a three-year lull between this little sister and Ellen, the previous baby. Mum comes home from the hospital with this newborn baby and has to take care of six other kids under the age of eight after just having a baby. Bernice and CarlyBoy go

home and I'm glad. CarlyBoy has a candy dish full of little kids to fondle. He has a thing for sticking his tongue into the mouths of little kids and sticking his hands down their pants.

1959

Dad rents a tiny red house right on a beach in Harwichport, Cape Cod. Our family of nine has it for a week with various aunts and uncles visiting.

As usual I'm crying a lot. Aside from crying, I either have my head bent down in disgrace, only looking at the ground or I am hiding. My head is down everywhere I walk because I am the ugliest girl in the world.

"Look at her hiding like an ostrich!" my father says.

"She has really buck teeth," my visiting Aunt Arlene says.

"Let's see your teeth," they both say.

"Oh, my God," my aunt says.

It was my sweet Uncle Frank who told me the story of the "Ugly Duckling" while visiting. It was just he and I sitting in our kitchen with the *National Geographic* maps all over the walls, when he told me the story. I always had messy stringy hair, buck teeth, and a neck that was ridiculously long like the stalk of a leafless flower with the flower petals all squashed and bent for a head. But Uncle Frank assured me that the little ugly duck turns into a beautiful swan and that I would be a lovely swan, too, someday.

Uncle Frank believed in me. Uncle John did, too. They were my father's brothers who told us stories the way the old Irish do. We'd sit around Uncle John's chair in the living room while he recounted "The Happy Prince" who is really a statue with real jewels for eyes and buttons on his clothes. This prince statue is way up high on a building

overlooking a town. He can see all the poor people who need something like food for the families or warm clothes for a girl, so the happy prince tells a little bird to pluck out his jewels and bring them down to give away. The little bird waits too long to leave before the winter and he freezes to death curled up on the statue of the happy prince.

Or sometimes Uncle John tells his funny version of “Cinderella” with the mean stepsisters in Army boots. I cry when he tells us the story of “The Little Match Girl.” She’s a little raggedy girl who is trying to sell matches on the city street and she’s so cold that she lights all of her matches to keep from freezing to death. Uncle John is my godfather and he doesn’t notice how ugly I am. He always brings me special presents every Christmastime even though I’m not at all pretty. No one else in the family has a nice godfather like I do. But I’m shy around him. I still can’t relax into being anyone special.

My mother scares me, and I stay out of her way. She’s too busy to pay attention anyway. But this one day when we are eating lunch at the beach house, she grabs my hand and says,

“What’s wrong with your fingernails?”

I’m ashamed of my fingernails because they are all bashed in, rippled, and dented. None of the other kids have this fingernail problem. Or the buck teeth. Or the too long neck. Or the bad eyesight. Just me. I try to hide my hands from her, but she sees them and is mad.

“Good Lord,” she says. “When we get back home, you are going to Doctor Brown to have them all pulled out.”

And she went about slapping baloney on the Wonder Bread, squirting on the French’s yellow mustard, and slamming another slice of bread on top of nine sandwiches.

Pull them all out? Pull out my fingernails? Isn't that what my brother says the Chinese do to torture people? They pull out their fingernails?

Sister Rosaleen says that God is almighty and can do anything. Surely, He can smooth out bashed in fingernails. Right there in Harwichport, I start to beg God that I don't get my fingernails yanked out. I need a miracle. A real one. I start to soak them in hot water. Then I put on some of the hand cream from the medicine cabinet. I pray every day and every night that God will hear me and that I won't have my fingernails pulled out. I beg God. Plead with God. I am on my knees in the bathroom with the door locked, crying.

I pray to God, "Please don't let my fingernails get pulled out. Please God, I'll do anything. Just don't let that happen."

Then I wash my face and walk out of the bathroom like nothing happened in there.

But a miracle does happen. There is a God, I know now for sure, because He listened and answered my prayers. It wasn't that my fingernails smoothed out. It was that my mother completely forgot about them and she never brought it up again. I spent a few years hiding my hands from everyone, especially my mother. I filed my nails carefully, greased them with Vaseline, slid them into white church gloves for the night, willing them to smooth out while I slept. Years later, by seventh grade, they do smooth out. I read in *Ingenue* magazine how to use an orange wood stick to gently push back the cuticles and I polished them with pinkish clear polish that I buy at Woolworth's.

Bernice is my mother's older sister and she and CarlyBoy have no children of their own. About every two weeks, my mother drives us all up to Wakefield to visit them. Mum is

kind of a new driver and very nervous on the twenty-minute drive. When we drive near an eighteen-wheeler semi, she screams as she drives, “Mother of God, we’re going to get killed! I can picture one of you kids getting squashed under the wheels of that truck! Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!”

The giant wheels of the truck roar alongside our gray station wagon. I’m holding a baby sister on my lap. Joey is lying on the floor under our feet. Kids climb over the middle seat and into the way back while she drives along Rte. 128. When she slams on the brakes and stops short she flings her arm in front of us, so we don’t whack our faces on the dashboard if we’re up front. A rip on the blue glitter plastic backseat gets bigger as my sister sticks her foot into the gray stuffing.

We get to Bernice and CarlyBoy’s house on Yale Avenue and pile out of the car next to their perfect flower garden that we are instructed under threats to stay away from.

“Walk over this way to stay out of the gardens or you’ll sit in the car,” we are told. Nobody dares to go near the gardens. Nobody dares to even look at the gardens.

Bernice has made us lunch that includes her potato rolls that we love. Her recipe was published in *Good Housekeeping* a long time ago and no wonder. We are only allowed to have just two each because they’re so good and we’d eat too many. There are bird feeders in the yard with the flowers and vegetables growing. They talk about Juncos and Starlings and Chickadees.

“Oh, those Starlings are always stealing the seed from the feeders!” Bernice giggles like a little girl. CarlyBoy says he has something to show me out behind the garage later.

First we go into the house for lunch in the dining room with the green and gold medallions on the wallpaper. There's a "high boy," a "sideboard," and a "dry sink." There are clocks all around the house that need to get wound by hand. On the hour, they gong and bong and whirl and chime in every room of the first floor of their house. We never go upstairs because the upstairs is rented to tenants.

The furniture is clean. Everything is clean. There are doilies on the armchairs and plants by the windows. Tall ceramic statues of children in old-fashioned dresses are on the "sideboard" where CarlyBoy keeps the candy. He always has a box of "seconds" chocolates in the drawer. Three antique "irons" are on a shelf by the kitchen table. My aunt says they were once used to iron clothes after they were heated up in the fire. My aunt and uncle go to antique shows and rummage sales. They buy boxes of junk and sort through it. They read up on the stuff and re-sell it.

"We bought this painting for a dollar and sold it for a hundred," Bernice tells my mother who sits in the sunroom with an iced tea. My sister and I sit on the "day bed." We've never heard of this furniture anywhere else.

CarlyBoy gives us candy that he keeps in the drawer of the sideboard in their dining room. Mostly he gives us bubblegum with Joe Bazooka comics inside the pack. He has piles of comic books, too—Archie and Veronica, Nancy and Sluggo, Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge are some of our favorites. He also gives us Cepacol mouth wash. He gives little bottles to each of us and tells us to rinse out our mouths. Then he tells me that he wants to teach me how to tell time out in the back room. Or that he'll teach me how to play tennis out behind his garage.

CarlyBoy says it's time to go out behind the garage with him. He brings his tennis racket because he's going to show me how to hold the racket. Out behind the garage past the vegetable garden where carrots and lettuce are growing in perfect little rows, CarlyBoy stands behind me. I'm to hold the racket like I'm shaking hands with someone. But he has his hands down my pants. I'm squirming and trying to pay attention to how to hold the racket. Because that's what he told me to do. He is saying one thing and doing another.

“No, not like that. Like this,” he says. No matter how I hold it, it's not the right way. His hands are touching me inside my underpants and he's laughing. But he pretends that he's not really doing that. He says that he's showing me how to play tennis.

In all of the photos of me as an ugly skinny second-grader, of which there are very few, my face looks exhausted, disheveled, and wrinkled. There are bags under my eyes. My baby teeth are tiny spaced Chiclets with giant parenthesis on either side of my mouth.

I'm dressing myself on First Communion Day alone in the quiet of my room. It's my turn to be, the princess, the fairy, the bride. I will be wearing a white dress with luxurious fabrics: chiffon, satin, & netting. My sister wore this dress last year when it was new. I'll wear a veil attached to a headband with tiny flocked flowers glued on. Even though the shoes are pinching my feet—I must have bigger feet than my sister—they are white, shiny, and they catch glimmers of light.

My father is going to drive me to the church early so the First Communion children can assemble together. Dressed in a “poof” of white, I step outside the kitchen to stand at the edge of the driveway so my father can back the car out of the garage. I have an imaginary magic wand in my hand and an imaginary crown on my head. I have an

imaginary giant bouquet of white roses in my arms. I am a beauty queen, a real princess, a bride as I stand waiting to be picked up on this important day. “What are you doing?” my father snaps at me. “Get in the car.”

I turn and walk back towards the garage past the lawnmower and gas cans, barrels and shovels.

When I’m all by myself, I can hear myself growing. It sounds like creaking inside my head and might look like a gray zigzag if I could see it. I sit on the wall by the driveway and squint in the sun, seeing little bubbles and squiggly lines of dust float down my eyeballs. And when I close my eyes there are orange and red branches. On the tips of my eyelashes there are little clear balls. I can feel my fingernails growing again. But Mum says it’s silly. No one can do that. But I know that I can. I can feel secrets inside of me. Sometimes I dream of sweaters. One is soft kitten fur white. The other is grey scratchy and rough. I lie out on the grass and watch the sky. The clouds hardly move at all sometimes.

Aunt Bernice has cloth dolls from the rummage sales for us to play with when we are at her house. In the peace and quiet she shows me how to water her plants with a little copper watering can. They are in her sunroom near a giant spinning wheel. The sunroom is where Mary and I sleep on the fold out “daybed” when we stay overnight.

As we lie in the bed, the headlights of passing cars travel along the wall in the shape of windowpanes. The clock ticks. Then chimes. CarlyBoy comes in during the night. He lies on top of me and puts his mouth on mine sticking his tongue inside. His hands wiggle into my pajamas. I try to pretend I’m asleep, but it doesn’t work.

Once, my aunt came in and said, “Oh Honey—what are you doing?”

And he got off me and went back to their bedroom.

Every two weeks we are at Bernice and CarlyBoy’s. Aunt Bernice has crocheted little blankets for our dolls. She’s shown us how to cook, too. While Aunt Bernice goes off to Mass, Mary and I are to take baths. CarlyBoy isn’t Catholic so he doesn’t go to Mass. Instead he stays home and fills the tub and helps us into it. Afterwards he’s laughing and insists on drying us off. He makes us lie on his bed spread eagle while he carefully “powders our bottoms”, but he’s really touching our hoosies. Then he tickles me until I have a stomachache. Then he’s on top again with his tongue in my mouth. I wipe it off and wipe it off. Bernice comes home from Mass and CarlyBoy wants to teach me how to tell time out in the back room while she makes dinner with Mary. He’s telling me that the number one on the clock is really a five. And that the two on the clock is really a ten. But I don’t see it. He’s telling me these things about a clock face while his hands are down my pants.

At school we all have to have a physical. I have no idea what a physical is. All we are told is that we must wear clean underpants to school that day. Then all the girls file down to the school basement with Sister Melterese. We are told to go into the lavatory and take off everything but our underpants, our slip, and our shoes. We hold our clothes in our arms. We are told to wait in line for our turn until we step up to a wall made out of a curtain. Behind the curtain is a doctor with a stethoscope. When it’s my turn, I can’t stop shaking like my mother’s sewing machine.

The doctor and the nurse ask each other like I’m not even there, “Why is she shaking so much?” The doctor looks at me, then listens to my heart.

Later in the fifth grade a girl invites me to stay overnight at her house. I am terrified. I don't want to go. I still can't tell time and I'm in the fifth grade.

The walk home from school is long. Through the Newton Center playground, by the brook, my little brother Joey walks in the brook and gets his shoes wet. My father yells at him every day, but he does it anyway, every day. Our street is like a highway that we have to cross. It goes right into Boston. My mother watches for us to get home from school from a front upstairs bedroom window while a baby sits on her lap.

"One of these days I'll see one of you run over by a car," she says with a faraway look. She's had seven kids in nine years.

We have sixteen people living in our house now. Five college girls live on the top floor and two college girls live in the basement, making Boston College above us and below us. For the basement room, Dad nailed "Naughty pine" paneling on the walls and made some built-in beds with drawers underneath. I keep getting Naughty pine mixed up with Lime Rickey, one of Dad's favorite drinks. I keep calling the wood Lime Rickey instead of naughty pine and he doesn't know what I'm talking about. So I stand on the sidelines in silence and hold the wood when he tells me, hand him the hammer and nails when he asks for them.

Our Dad went to Boston College and taught us to sing the school song.

For Boston, for Boston

We sing our proud refrain!

For Boston, for Boston

Till the echoes ring again.

For here men are men and their hearts are true

And the towers on the heights reach to heavens own blue

For Boston, for Boston

Till the echoes ring again!

We sing this song when we're dancing around or while we are on the swings outside. Dad takes us ice skating at the Boston College hockey rink. He's always talking about college. "You're a loser if you don't go to college," he says every day. "Go to college, go to college. And put your napkin on your lap," he says.

Mum has to keep track of the college girl's comings and goings every day and doesn't like that one bit. One good thing—she doesn't have to cook for them, except when there's only one or two at home during vacations, and the college girls babysit for us every weekend while my parents go to the movies. Two of the girls teach us how to play the piano. When the girls go out on dates, my younger sister Ellen entertains the guys while they sit waiting in the den. Ellen has light hair like a dandelion puff. She's like a happy little flower laughing and making faces at the guys when she peeks around the door. She does silly dances and tells the college boys jokes.

When the girls are out in the driveway washing their cars, we polish the bikes that Dad bought for each of us out of the classifieds. Dad shows us how to use chrome polish on the chrome and turtle wax on the colored parts. We buff our bikes until they shine while he polishes his car and the girls do theirs. He teaches each of us to ride our bikes alongside the hedge that lines one side of the driveway.

"Fall into the hedge! Lean towards the hedge!" he yells to us. But we fall on the pavement anyway scraping knees. Once I scraped my knee so badly that I felt sick. It was too big a scrape for the one little band-aid I put on it from the medicine cabinet. The scrape had turned bright red, green, and yellow with crusty ooze coming out. I didn't want to get out of bed for supper. Andrea told Dad that I had a big cut and to come upstairs.

“Good heavens,” he said when he came up to the room I shared with my older sister. “That’s all infected and you have a fever.” He cleaned it off and put bacitracin on it then a big white gauze pad on it with white tape. I was glad he came upstairs and helped me because I didn’t know what to do.

After our bikes are sparkling, he takes six of the seven of us on a bike ride through the shady neighborhoods. Block after block the trees line the streets and sidewalks. Every street has a sidewalk. Some have lots of cracks in them. Others are made of bumpy black tar. We follow our dad as we ride down to Bulloughs Pond and the tiny waterfall near it. We love to ride with him while the baby stays at home with Mum.

On Saturdays, Dad has everybody help with the yard. We have a front lawn and a back yard which Dad really wishes was a golf course. The little ones pick up rocks and sticks, somebody trims the walkway with hand clippers, Dad uses his new electric clippers to trim the hedge, my oldest brother runs the hand mower, someone else pushes the half-size hand mower on the edge of the walkway. The rest of us rake the clippings into little piles and my younger brother Joey picks them up and into a wheelbarrow to dump behind the garage.

My older sister sits on the back steps away from the rest. “I don’t want to do this,” she states. After a few minutes, Dad makes her get up and help but she does her job as slowly as she can with a half-smile on her face. She’s like an actress in a slow motion movie. Dad calls her “Lady Mary” because she doesn’t like to get her hands dirty.

When we are through fixing up the yard, he gets out some small juice glasses. For our reward, he pours ginger ale or coke into each glass and the little kids are laughing as we clink them with a big sigh of relief that our job is done for the day. Then he pours

himself a glass of lager beer and lets everybody take a sip, even the little ones. I always love the taste of his beer. It's ice cold. That's the only time we ever have any fizzy drinks. Although when we have stomach aches, he gets out his bottle of coke syrup to mix with a little water—no fizz.

Dad's in charge of everybody's teeth. "Be true to your teeth or they will be false to you," he says to us on a regular basis and he stands watching everything the dentist does in our mouths with no Novocain because he knows he'll be paying for it.

"I don't see a cavity there where you're drilling," he tells the dentist.

"There isn't one now, but there will be," says the dentist.

My father is mad. There are lots of mouths to fill with silver.

One winter, we went out in the snow. Dad found a toboggan in the trash out in front of a neighbor's house. They had thrown it away because it had a long crack at the back end, but it was an extra-long one and could fit eight and was still rideable. He took us to different golf courses to ride it. Once he parked the car by a hill on the edge of the course, he had us all get on the toboggan right there at the street on top of a giant snow bank. We flew down the hill out of control and lost a few kids off the back before we came to a stop. Somebody got a bloody nose.

"Gee whiskers," he said. "Let's not do that again."

All nine of us in the family sleep on the second floor. In the morning when Mum wakes us up, we have to get out of bed right away, so we lie on the floor outside of the bathroom waiting our turn. An assortment of small bodies in night gowns and pajamas roll in half sleep on the brown carpet like sausages on a grill.

Sometimes if we're in a hurry we use the tub for a toilet. On Saturdays we take

baths since our tub has no shower. I take it with my older sister. Occasionally five of us share the same bathtub water. It's the equivalent of bathing in a toilet with two, sometimes three at a time in the tub until the next batch of kids get into the same water. I love taking baths with my siblings even though my sweetly smiling bathing companion might point to a warm yellow cloud blooming near her. We are happily unaware of the germs we're marinating in.

Mum is very thrifty because she lived through the great depression. We use handkerchiefs that get washed when we need to blow our noses, she washes all the sponges in the washing machine and we've never had paper towels. We use bars of Ivory soap to wash our hair. We only take baths on Saturdays and I notice how clean Renee M.'s ankles are. My ankles are so dirty that I scrape off the dirt with my fingernail and see white streaks. Nobody ever told me that others wash more often than Saturday. Dad goes to the YMCA to take a shower. We don't know what Mum does.

I'm seven years old and I'm a Brownie. Mrs. Marcou is our leader and arranges things for us to do. She brought us to Fanny Farmer candy factory where we watched how they made chocolates and hard candies. Chocolates travel along a moving belt under a shower of liquid chocolate. Then a giant wad of stretchy taffy get twisted and choked and shaped into a glossy log. There's a green Christmas tree shape at each end. Then Red and white stripes of taffy hug the outside. A chunky lady in a white uniform and a white net on her head stretches the shiny ham of a log to a thin snake that gets cut into little pieces so that the Christmas tree is still inside. She passes a piece to each of us to suck on.

On another field trip, our leader and some other mothers brought us to Cedar Hill in Waltham for a cook-out and a hike in the woods. We'd made tin can stoves the week

before at a meeting and then we cooked on them. That was my first time entering a dusty outhouse with spiders and webs. It was too scary to sit and try to wet on the black hole, so I held it until I could hide behind a tree and wet on some leaves outside the outhouse.

We'd have our brownie meetings after school down in the cafeteria that smelled like sour milk and apples. That was the cafeteria where we sat ten kids to a table and I was always the last one to finish my lunch. Day after day I was the only one still eating after the other kids all left to go outside for recess. Each of my brothers and sisters and I had one lunch bag for the entire week or more, folded along the same seamlines until one of the seams wore through, meriting a fresh bag. In each of our bags was the same folded wax paper every day, stained maybe with mustard or peanut butter. Lunch was peanut butter and cheese (or jelly), baloney and French's mustard, or on Fridays a thin smear of tuna fish, always on Wonder Bread. My mother could make seven tuna sandwiches out of one can. It was a mystery in my class as to why I was so slow eating a sandwich. But I was slow at everything. The kids talk about me in third person because I hardly talk to anyone.

"I know why she's always last!" the blond girl with the sticky hands says. "It's because she has big bread."

I'm glad she said that. I just can't hurry in school. I don't know what's going on most of the time, probably because I'm the youngest in the class.

"She's in a fog all the time," my mother tells people. "Out to lunch," the nun says.

Which explains what happened one Saturday.

I was playing "farm" on the floor of the bedroom I shared with my older sister. All of a sudden, my mother yelled upstairs. "You forgot that you're supposed to be up at

the Sacred Heart parking lot to get on the bus for Brownies! They're waiting for you! Quick! Hurry up!"

Mum doesn't have a car to bring me there, so, all flustered, I run the mile to the school, crossing Commonwealth Ave by myself and trying to run the whole way. My stomach aches so I have to keep stopping to walk. Down Cedar Street, then down Homer Street, then down the hill through the Newton Center playground past the swings and the tennis courts, then up the hill past Woolworth's and Stralee's Office Supply, then finally, completely out of breath from rushing, to the Sacred Heart parking lot where there is no one there. No bus. My red leather shoes hurt. None of the other Brownies forgot about the trip. So I walk home. Not only am I an ugly kid, but stupid, too.

Now Mum's sister Evelyn has died after going into the hospital to have her gall bladder out. She died during the operation. When Mum came home from the hospital and got out of the car, she said, "She died," and started to cry.

Dad put his arms around her for the first time I ever saw. Mum has a faraway face. Her sister was lovely, but we hardly ever see her because when we go over to Somerville, we usually stay in the car.

Mum's other sister Sara has already died of cancer and her father died of a stroke, whatever that is. All I can think of is that Sara was my godmother and now I don't have a godmother. She died a few months after I was born, and I don't remember her. Mum says that Sara gave me five dollars to put in my bank account that Dad set up for each of us. I'd like to go to the bank and touch the five-dollar bill that Aunt Sara touched.

"That's impossible. It's a different five in there now," Mum says. But I want to touch it anyway because my godmother touched it. Dad set up maroon bank books for

each of us up at the brand-new Savings Bank with the slanted cement bumpy walls on the outside.

Dad has joined a golf club so he can meet new people to sell insurance to. All he thinks about is golf now. He plays golf every Saturday and Sunday.

“I work all week,” he yells at Mum after he tells her that he’s heading to the club.

“Then give me twenty dollars so I can go to the Star Market,” Mum says with her mouth a straight line again. She doesn’t talk to us.

The golf club has a pool, so he tells Mum to bring us there every day in the summer. We’re dropped off after lunch and although there are kids there, it’s lonely. Mum doesn’t want to stay because she is embarrassed in a bathing suit and thinks she’s fat. The other mothers lie around poolside in lawn chairs and they talk and smoke cigarettes together. Mum seems different from these mothers. She’s shy and doesn’t talk with other mothers here at the pool or at Sacred Heart School.

A long time ago Mum was changing diapers and stirring hamburger in a black frying pan on our gas stove. Out in our backyard, I’d stand by her and hand her clothespins while she hung clothes and sheets on the aluminum umbrella clothesline, then I’d let them twist around me as they rippled in the wind. In the kitchen, I’d stand on a chair and watch her roll cookie dough on the floured Formica counter and cut it in shapes. She sewed calico dresses for my older sister and me, then with the leftover fabric she’d make dresses for our dolls, even while she had so many babies to change and feed. Those dresses had flowers on them as big as a thumbnail with pine-tree-green rickrack trimming the edges of the ruffled sleeves. She knit mittens for us with strings attached that threaded through the sleeves of our coats, so we wouldn’t lose them. In the middle of

the kitchen table she placed a green glass hob-nail vase filled with pansies or violets. She had every intention of being the best mother because she had been an art teacher and she had waited a long time before becoming a mother. In my eyes, my mother is beautiful. She's a talented artist and educator who shows us how to listen to the wind, watch the clouds, love animals and appreciate beauty.

Mum yells at me all the time now, mostly when I'm with the other kids. The only time she's not mad it seems, is when she brings us to the museums. Or when she's in church where I want to sit next to her and pat her real fur mink stole around her neck. It has a triangle mink head and a tail. You can make the mouth open when you squeeze the back of the head behind the ears, so it bites onto the tail. Its yellow eyes are glass and its feet are long with black toe-nails. I pat it and rub it and it smells like Evening in Paris, the blue-bottled perfume that Barry bought her for Christmas with his own money. But Mum doesn't look at me when I pat her fur. It's like I'm not even there because her mouth is straight across again as she stares at the picture of Jesus behind the altar. When it's time to collect money, she gives each of us a nickel or a dime to drop in the long-handled basket that men pass around. Sometimes they bop me on the head with the basket and I don't like that. I like to lean against Mum when it's quiet in the church even though I'm invisible to her.

Mum walks through the galleries of the museum like she's in church because the galleries are just as holy to Mum. We always head for the Degas sculpture of the ballerina when we are there. Mum made little pink tutus for my older sister and me once when she had more time, maybe so we'd be the little ballerinas of Degas that she loved so much.

But now she yells at me for having my hair in my eyes, for tilting back my chair at the kitchen table, for crying all the time. So I stay out of her way. I got a red fake leather diary with a key for my birthday. It's a five year one with hardly any space to write much but I write in it every night before I go to sleep. I need more room on the paper. I need a bigger diary.

Mum's stressed out about a lot of stuff, but mostly about my older brother who is in trouble again in the eighth grade. His nun is Sister Dorothy, but the kids call her "Big Dot." She's like a building draped in black—massive, tough, and scary. There's a hole in the eighth-grade slate black board where she shoved a kid's head to make that hole.

I'm a sixth grader out in the school yard during recess walking around alone while Big Dot keeps the kids under surveillance. She's yelling at anyone who dares to run around out here. No one is supposed to run. We can jump rope or walk, but that's all. I'm walking around alone wearing the green knit hat with a pompom on top that my Aunt Bernice made for me.

Even though my goal is to stay out of Sister Dorothy's crosshairs, she has positioned her eyes on me and takes aim.

"Hey GREENIE!" she yells over to me. "You come up to my classroom after recess."

This is different that she calls me "Greenie." She usually calls to me with a "Hey You."

When the bell rings and it's time for the class to go inside, I dilly dally until I'm the last in line to walk into the school. At the bottom of the stairs that lead to the up to the eighth-grade classroom, it smells like apples in the hall. I already know what it is that she wants with me because I've had to do this a few times before, but today I'm "Greenie" to

her and not “Hey you.” The stairs have tiny cream and gray squares on them with flecks of glitter. There is a metal strip on the lip of each step as I go up one by one and there are tiny piles of grit and dirt on each one. The eighth-grade door has one small window on it and as soon as I knock on it Sister Dorothy’s face fills the entire window like the flick of a slide in a projector. The door opens to an enormous black form. Her headpiece covers everything but her pink face and maniacal grin. Except for a white triangle of some stiff white material above the forehead of her pink face, her entire monumental shape is covered in black cloth.

“Come in, GREENIE!” she shouts and leers at me wide-eyed in front of the class of fifty-four students, her emphasis on “Greenie.” With a dramatic wave of her hand she’s loud when she yells, “Follow me!”

I follow her mountainous build, my eyes on the oiled wood floor boards, past the first-aisle of students. Fifty-four sets of eyes are on me as I pass the hole in the black board that’s the shape of some kid’s head.

“Where’s your GREEN HAT?” she bellows, emphasizing Green Hat.

I am shaking, and I don’t know what to say. Her eyes remain fixed on me as she slides into her desk chair like a lizard and opens her top drawer, her eyes never leaving my face.

“I want another note to go home to your mother. It’s about your horrible BAD brother again. Your SCUM of a brother,” she barks so that the whole class hears. I take the note from her hand and back away, turning and rushing down the aisle to get out of there as fast as I can.

In a sing-song voice of high drama, she screams after me, “Thank you, GREENIE!”

My brother is somewhere in the middle of the room, but I don't see him because I'm afraid to look around. I go out the door and start to cry as I go back downstairs to my sixth-grade classroom. I wait a minute before I go in, so I can wipe my eyes.

At home that afternoon, I hand the note to my mother who is rocking my little sister who bumped her head.

"Oh no, not another one," she says with a sigh and the big worry look that she always has on her face. That's when her eyebrows lower making two vertical lines on her forehead and her mouth goes into a straight line with one side pinched and slanted again.

Not long after that, my brother runs away from home for three days. He hitchhikes to Cape Cod by himself. He's thirteen. I heard my father tell him he is a loser. But my brother is a caddy at the golf course and he's had a paper route for a long time and he bought colored wooden blocks for our baby sister for Christmas and presents for all of us with his own money. I helped him fold the papers in the mornings.

Our nun in seventh grade, Sister Elizabeth Joseph, is reading a story to our class about a boy who's also in seventh grade. He's a boy who talks to God a lot because he has troubles at home and the story makes me cry and I'm embarrassed. But I sneak peeks at the other kids and I see a few wiping their noses. She reads a chapter every day and asks us to guess why she's reading this.

"Is he your brother?"

"Is he your son?"

"It can't be her son, dummy. She's a nun and nuns don't have kids."

All I can think of is that she wrote the story herself, but we never find out because there's yelling outside the window. It's Jeffrey Davis's mother out on her porch with her radio playing loud. Sister opens the window and we hear, "The president has been shot! The president has been shot!"

Sister holds her hand to her mouth. The whole class gasps and moves to the window to hear that President Kennedy has been shot. He'll get better, I think. It's almost time to go home for the weekend when we hear this. Sister says,

"Class, back to your seats and gather your things."

She's nice, so we do what she tells us. Jimmy Dwyer lifts up all of the honey-colored wooden sliding doors that hold our coats, and row by row all fifty-four of us get our coats and book bags and go back to our seats. One time the door fell down on Jimmy's head and everyone laughed at him. It looked like it hurt, but kids still thought it was funny. Almost all of us get ready to walk home with the exception of a few kids whose mothers pick them up.

At home my mother has the television on in our stuffy den. One by one the others come home from school and drift in to watch the news that tells us that President Kennedy died after all. There are not enough seats for everybody in the den so most of us are sitting cross-legged on the floor around the TV. The college girls are in there, too, crying, but most of us are quiet as Walter Cronkite reports, and the television shows Jackie with her hand on the Bible in the plane, then the TV cameras pan in and show people from all over the country crying.

The black and white television has us gripped all weekend. On Monday there is no school because it's a Day of Mourning.

“Dad, what is that horse doing?” I ask as we watch a uniformed man lead a horse behind the President’s coffin that rolls along, flag-draped. It’s a rider-less horse whose stirrups are holding boots in backwards. It bucks its black head and wrenches it back and forth as the man wrestles to control him down Pennsylvania Avenue. Everyone else is solemn except this restless horse who jerks to clop sideways during the procession.

“The empty boots in the stirrups symbolize a fallen warrior,” Walter Cronkite answers me.

When the procession reaches Arlington National cemetery and the trumpet plays “Taps,” a couple of the college girls start to bawl. They watch television with us all weekend and again when we have no school on Monday for the Day of Mourning.

Most school days I don’t want to go home. By the time I’m twelve, I take a long time walking home alone. Sometimes I stop at the music store that’s right next door to the pizza shop where my older brother and sister hang out after school with their friends who never notice me.

I go into the music store to look through sheet music. The man in there never kicks me out even though I’ve never bought anything. I stand and flip through the files of music books and sheet music, studying pieces that I think I could play on the piano, like “Alley Cat.” I survey the piece for a long time because I’m sure I could play it if I had the music. Somedays I stay for hours so I don’t have to go home. I don’t want anyone at home knowing I go to the music store because they’ll tease me. My brother saw me going in one time, but he didn’t say anything. Didn’t wave to me either.

They might tease me the way they did when Dad played “Leibestraum” on the record player and I got tears in my eyes.

“Look at Martha! She’s crying! Hahahaha!” They pointed at me, laughing.

“What a jerk! She actually likes this stuff! Hahahahaha!”

Dad had bought this Time-Life classical record set through the mail, so we would be “cultured.” He set up one record on our coffin-sized stereo and made everybody sit and listen. Nobody wanted to hear it except me, though, so I pretended to be like the others who kicked and elbowed each other until Dad gave up and turned it off. But the music woke something up in me that I didn’t know was there.

Later for many nights, I snuck down when no one was around and played it as softly as I could with my ear on the speaker. Again and again when no one saw me, I tiptoed down to the den like I was committing a crime, not wanting anyone to know that I liked it.

I go to the library to look at books on how to make things like doll clothes or doll houses, but I don’t bring the books home because I don’t want anyone to know that I like this stuff either. I just look at the same books again and again while sitting at one of the big round wooden tables in the children’s room. The librarians are nice to me. One of them has a limp and wears a shoe with a thick sole on it. Her hair is always fixed nicely and heavily sprayed with hairspray so that it never moves. She has a kind smile for me.

My sister told me that I’m too big to like dolls, but I still do. In secret at home, I make a house out of a cardboard box with little furniture and accessories for my dolls. I’m eleven in the seventh grade because Mum sent me off to school early to have one less kid at home.

I’m either alone making things like doll furniture out of Kleenex boxes, or looking at books at the library about making doll houses or sewing, or I hang out in the music store on my way home from school, spending hours looking at all the racks of

sheet music there, with no money to buy anything. At home I'm usually with my younger brother and sisters or I'm with my Dad when he builds stuff. My older brother and sister don't want me hanging around them.

I still help my Dad when he builds stuff. I hold the wood on the saw horse, but he doesn't talk to me. He just says, "Hand me that screw driver." "Get me the Phillips head one." "Hold these nails." "Hand me the hammer now."

He just says, "Gee, whiskers," when he's not sure what to do next in the project. Besides helping him nail "naughty pine" to the basement walls and make built-in beds, I've helped him tile floors, put down carpeting, roll paint on walls, and make a cabinet in the kitchen. I like to watch my Dad in his undershirt and olive army pants when he builds things. His hands are strong and can do all kinds of things, even pull a piece of cinnamon toast out of baby Terese's nose. His wide wrinkly fingers stuck right up there and pulled it out. Another time when he took us fishing with drop lines off the bridge in Falmouth, he was hooking a wriggling centipede onto the hook and the pincers on its head bit Dad's wide index finger.

"Yow! Gee whiskers!" he said. But he pulled it off his finger, squeezed blood out and forgot about it.

Mum's mother, Gramma, is really sick, but she can't get over to help her out because of all the kids at home, so her other sisters are helping and they're not happy about that. Mum's tries to visit Gramma every two weeks and we have to wait in the car out in the driveway when she does. Her mother is a grouch who only lives twenty minutes away from us, but we've only seen her a handful of times. Mum says Gramma doesn't like

kids. She's seen enough of them because she had nine kids when they lived in a tiny apartment.

The few times we visit we never stay long enough to sit down, and Mum looks sad when we're there. Once when I was little, I tried to sit on Gramma's lap, but it was like sitting on a granite boulder.

"Get her off me, Pauline," she said to Mum.

The last time I saw my grandmother, I had dressed myself up for the visit. I put on a green tiny flowered shift with pleats down the front and a headband to match, but she complained to my mother like I wasn't even there,

"She calls that a dress? That shapeless thing? And her hair's a mess."

On another visit she yells at Mum about the potato pancake mixture that had turned black in her refrigerator. Like it was Mum's fault. But Mum's mother was an ace in crochet and tatting. The one time she visited our new house she told my mother that she didn't like it, but she crocheted curtains for the windows in our hall anyway.

Gramma dies, and we go to the funeral. In the car on the way to the cemetery, I get tears in my eyes. My cousin Jimmy says, "What are you crying for? She was an old bat." And I realize that I didn't even know my grandmother who wasn't very nice to me. I just feel bad for my Mum because it's her third death. She's already lost her Pa from a stroke, her sister, Sadie from cancer and her sister Evelyn from a gall bladder operation.

There is nothing for me to do after school now in eighth grade because I have no one to do anything with. But at least my older sister and I are signed up for Saturday art classes at the Museum of Fine Arts with Mr. Rosenthal. We walk up to the Newton Centre train station to take the twenty-minute train ride, then we walk across the Fenway to the

museum. Once there was a small man who whispered to us to come to the bushes with him, but we kept walking. Another time as we were headed to downtown Boston to walk around the Common, someone hucked a clam looey out the trolley window and it landed on the front of my shirt.

The only girl that I once hung around with, now has a new group of friends that I'm not invited to be with. Out in the playground, the girls talk about their periods and bras. I don't know anything about periods or bras because I don't have either. I didn't know that the others don't wear undershirts anymore either until someone says to me, "You still wear an undershirt? Hahahaha!"

I am embarrassed. How do they know that they should wear something other than an undershirt? How did they get a bra? I have no idea if my older sister has one or not. She doesn't talk to me. And neither does my mother. I decide that I will wear a slip now and roll it up around my waist so that there is a shadow through my white uniform blouse that looks like I wear a bra. But the front of the slip is made of rough fabric with white machine embroidery. It rubs on my nipples and I have to put band-aids on them, so they don't bleed again. I want the slip to look like I wear a bra.

I overheard the girls talking about blood that comes out of girls every month. But I don't know anything about that. They said that their mothers told them and gave them books to read about it and then they complain about their mothers. When I go home I try to look this up in a dictionary, but I don't know what to look up. I have no idea what this is even called to look it up. I have no idea where to find information about this if it happens to me someday. It's all a big secret. I study my mother's face, thinking that she must know about all this.

“You don’t know about periods? How could you not know?” the girls finally ask. I feel so stupid that I don’t know this stuff. My older sister never mentioned it and I share a room with her.

They say that a man “plants a seed” inside a girl and she gets pregnant. How does that happen, I wonder? A seed? They said there are eggs inside the girls. This is new to me. What will I do if blood comes out of me, too? What else will happen to me? Will snot come out of my nipples? Will I get pregnant if I like a boy? What else is there that no one has told me about?

By the time I’m in eighth grade, Sister Dorothy has been shipped off to a hospital. Two fathers of eighth graders are doctors who told the bishop that she needs a “rest.” So, my class has a new sister for our eighth-grade teacher, Sister Faber.

I don’t understand the math that we are supposed to be doing. Sister Faber says I can come after school and she helps me with it. But mostly she pays attention to me. With fifty-four kids in her class every day, and her worn-out hoarse voice that makes her need a microphone from a tape-recorder to amplify what she’s saying, Sister Faber still lets me come after school with her, so she can explain the math to me.

There’s a lot of fantasy in math, I notice. Lots of invisible things that are happening that make no sense. There are equations that looks like this:

$$\frac{80}{100} = \frac{n}{60}$$

At least that’s what I think it is. She tells me to make a diagonal line from the 80 to the 60. It makes no sense to me to transform one number into another. I have to imagine, and remember, that one number is really another number. That what is in front of my eyes is

not really what is there. This keeps happening. This thing about one thing really being another thing.

Sister Faber is patient. After a long day of teaching, she still has time for me. Just me sitting with her. I feel ugly and small and invisible, but she sees me. I don't know what she's talking about with the math, but she is patient and tries to help me understand. She tells me that God is always interested in me and everything I have to say, so I can talk to God anytime. In my diary, I decide to write "Dear God." Sister Faber gives me problems to work at while she corrects papers. I can sit next to her instead of going home where my mother yells at me all the time and I cry a lot onto a pink polyester pillow that's covered with salty blooms that look like flowers. It's my record of how much I cry.

Dear God,

I think this was the worst day of my life. These kinds of Saturdays are like the inside of a radio, all wires and tangles, static, dryer lint, and Brillo pads. Nothing to do but fight with everyone on Saturdays. First, Mary, Andrea, and I had a fight over the "Knox gelatin." I won't even go into it, it was so bad. I almost killed Mary. I would have, too, but something stopped me. Then, I said again that I hated Andrea, which I do, when she told what I said yesterday about hating Mummy's corn chowder and lying and hating and everything. I just stood near the kitchen cabinet near the door, drinking my iced tea and not saying anything. I felt like running over to that kid and smacking her with one sock to the head.

Then she said right out loud in front of everyone, "Martha said that she wished that Mummy was dead." Everyone froze in numb silence.

I ran out of the kitchen, upstairs to my room and cried really hard, completely ashamed. After a long while, there was a light knock on the door while I stood in the middle of my room not knowing what to do with my horrible self. Mum pushed the door open, standing there in a worn print dress and said, "I know you don't hate me. I just thought you'd like the corn chowder for a change."

She put her arms around me for a whole minute. And I cried because I was never so sorry in my life and at the same time I never felt happier in my life because it's the only time I ever remember getting held by her. Please God, help me to understand Mummy and help me to love her.

Love, Martha

A girl in our eighth-grade class comes in to school early before we have a math test and she goes through Sister Faber's desk to look for the answers to the tests. She takes it, copies it, then puts it back. Other kids take the answers from her after they give the girl a quarter. I take the "D" on the test because I don't want to get the answers that way.

My grades are terrible, but nobody notices at home because my brother takes up all my parents' attention. He's flunking out of Xaverian Brothers Catholic boy's school where Dad made him go. Dad took all of my brother's money from his caddy and paper route jobs without even asking him and he paid the tuition with it. My brother was so mad at Dad that he flunked out on purpose. Now he'll go to public school because Sacred Heart didn't want him back.

I share a bedroom with my sister who's 17 months older than I am, but she ignores me. We put a piece of masking tape down the middle of the room. I am not allowed to step over it or touch her bed. She has a secret life with her own friends and a boyfriend named Bill. She's beautiful and looks like Natalie Wood in *West Side Story*. She knows how to do everything and how to wear anything, but she keeps to herself.

There's so much I don't know, but I am invisible to her. In ninth grade, the college girls are gone. Mum has gone back to work as a junior high art teacher, so we don't need them living with us anymore. Mum was mad at the seven of them all the time.

“Look at the food they waste!” she yells. “A whole bowl of red Jell-O thrown down the sink!” My sister will stay in the room we’ve been sharing, and I’ll move to another part of the house where I’ll be even more separate from her.

Our house is a wooden yellow one on the nineteenth mile of the Boston Marathon. Now that the college girls are gone, Daddy wants to stop renting an office in downtown Boston and make his office right in our house to save money. He wants to transform the front room by the street into his insurance office. I help him paint the walls tan and we staple tan wall-to-wall carpeting right to the edges of the room. He buys two second hand desks from the classifieds and we drive out to Framingham to get them.

“Oh, your Dad shouldn’t lift that at his age,” says the woman selling them.

Our Dad doesn’t look old to me in his white undershirt and olive work pants. Our Dad is handsome. He sets up his office and hires a secretary from the classifieds who will work at our house every day from eight to two. Gladys is an older Jewish woman who makes us Mandelbrot cookies with candied cherries in them at Christmas.

Dad has a new home improvement plan. He’s rented a steamer to get all the wallpaper off the walls in the entire house. He plans on wallpapering the whole place eventually. He usually jumps into projects full blast and this is one of those things. All of the walls in the entire house have big patches of torn wallpaper. Some of it smells like chocolate but doesn’t taste like chocolate. The living room and hall used to have brown wallpaper with trees and horses riding on tree-lined streets. While I’m tearing off long stripes of wallpaper, I keep smelling its chocolate smell. Some pieces come off in sheets and others have to be scraped and scraped after we sponge the wall with warm water.

We all work on the walls except my mother. On Saturdays Dad rents the steamer and works from a ladder. We have buckets of water to swab the walls and then with a putty knife we scrape off the rest. Sometimes by mistake the tool digs a big line into the plaster. For a whole season or longer, we can draw all over the plaster. We write poems all over the walls. And we draw pictures everywhere. I make a giant copy of Hokusai's "The Wave" on the wall of my new room.

In ninth grade I am walking home from school in the Spring and happy to get a decent grade on a test for the first time all year. I feel light and untroubled while feeling something wet between my legs. I walk down Cedar Street, happy with the good weather and the good mark on the test. I never get good marks. The last test we were given, I had the lowest grade in the class. It was a thirty on a history test. When the nun read my grade out loud, everyone laughed. But today it was a good mark.

I head upstairs to my third-floor room where I drop my school bag on the floor. Next, I go in the bathroom, sit on the pot and there's blood in my underpants. No wonder I felt new and that the day wasn't like other days. I'm both happy and scared. Then I find clean underwear and wash out the blood-stained ones. I make a thick wad out of toilet paper and press it in my underpants. I hide in my room wondering what to do. I will have to make wads for my underwear every month I guess. Sometimes I tape them in with masking tape.

"Dinnertime!" my mother yells up the stairs. I go down to where some of my brothers and sisters are watching *Dobie Gillis* on the little television that's set up on the counter. We serve ourselves the fish sticks and peas that Mum has taken out of the oven and left on top of the stove. Nobody knows what's happened to me.

My friend Patty showed me how to wash out the underwear that gets wrecked from periods.

“Put soap on it and scrub it by rubbing two surfaces together,” she said as she demonstrated.

Patty also taught me how to shave my legs. I had found a razor in the bathroom to use and cut myself a lot until Patty showed me how to use soap and water first on wet skin.

The next Spring when I’m a sophomore, Mum says as she’s stirring broken up hamburger in the cast iron frying pan, “I went to the Sophomore parent-teacher conference last night. Sister Mary Clare tells me that you’re depressed.”

I shrug and take the hamburger on a plate with lima beans and take a seat at the table with my siblings to watch *F-Troop*.

The next afternoon when no one is around in the kitchen, Mum says, “Here’s a box of pads. You’ve probably heard the kids talking about that in school.”

And that’s that, when I’d been making pads out of toilet paper and masking tape for a year.

Dad decides that my buck teeth should be fixed. Most kids have braces off their teeth by now, but I’m just getting them on at fifteen. The teeth on either side of my front teeth are extracted and now I look like one of Lil Abner’s yokel neighbors in Dogpatch, USA. Up to now I’ve hidden my buck toothed smile with two fingers in front of my mouth, but now I don’t open my mouth at all and continue laughing in a nasally snicker. Silver metal braces go on my teeth and I agonize about dying now and spending eternity in a coffin as a skeleton wearing braces.

At school, Sister Mary Phillip, the sophomore geometry nun grabs my arm as the class is filing out through the classroom door for lunch. This is the nun who spent a good part of every hour with our class insulting people. I get the feeling that it's my turn now as her hands clench onto the white sleeve of my uniform blouse.

“Miss McSweeney. Wait. I want to tell you something.”

She's pulls my arm so I'm at one side of the door and her pasty face stares into mine for a couple of seconds. I wonder what I did because not five minutes before, she spent most of the geometry hour ragging on Raymond Keagan. Raymond had broken his leg and had a plaster cast on his leg from his big toe to his hip. He had been hobbling around on crutches for weeks already when Sister Joseph Mary decided his world needed to be a little worse. First she stands at his desk.

“Raymond Keagan, you're a phony. Do you know that?”

“No, Sister,” he says.

She stares at him like she wants him dead, then snatches his paper from his desk, tears it into pieces, and drops those on his desk. And like Dracula she spins around and parades herself in her black floor length habit to the front of the room to glare at the class.

“Raymond Keagan, get up here in front of the class.”

Raymond reaches for his crutches and makes his way from the very back of the room to the front. He positions himself on one leg with a hop.

“Face the class,” she says as he makes another hop and a turn.

“You're a sham. Do you know what a sham is?”

“No, Sister.”

“Well, you’re the biggest sham I’ve ever met in my life. Who in this room knows what a sham is? Who? Answer me. Does anyone in this group of dummies know what a sham is?”

The class is quiet.

“Class, take out your dictionaries and look up the word ‘sham’.”

The whole class bends over to pull dictionaries out of their desks, then pages crinkle and rumple as thirty kids look up the word ‘sham’. Colleen Wambolt gets called on to read the definition.

“Fake. Fraud. Imposter. Phony,” she says.

“Phony,” Sister says in a loud voice.

“Raymond Keagan, you are a phony. A sham. Class, tell Raymond Keagan that he’s a sham.”

Most of the kids—but not all—repeat with no expression like robots, “You’re a sham.”

And I wonder if she thinks he’s faking his broken leg.

Now the class is over, and she has grabbed me by the door. With a quick upward flick of her head and contempt for me on her face, she says, “Don’t even bother to apply to college, Miss McSweeney. Don’t. Even. Bother. It’d be a waste of everyone’s time.” Then she turns and walks down the hall to head for the convent.

Other kids are talking about college because that’s what I’m told we are supposed to do, but I hate school. I want to lie on the sand somewhere and listen to Judy Collins and Bob Dylan. The times we go to the beach with the family on Cape Cod, I lie on my stomach

and inspect the sand for microscopic sized seashells. If you look closely, there are miniscule conch shells and moon shells as small as grains of sand.

Or I spend hours in my new bedroom. I've painted all of the furniture hot pink and stapled illustrations from *Seventeen* magazine all over the walls. Uncle John gave me a little portable record player for Christmas and I play Judy Collins and Tom Rush and Melanie and Joni Mitchell over and over again. Sometimes in front of the mirror, I pretend I'm singing on stage. I hold a hair brush for a fake microphone and I lip sync.

Even though Mum still yells at me, mostly because I'm late for everything and I'm not paying attention, I still want to be an artist like her. I believe that an artist is the highest form of life there is. She doesn't make art anymore, though, but she can really draw. The drawings and paintings that she's done in the past prove that she's great.

Dad tried to make her a workroom out of a closet, once, but there's no time for her to go there and do anything. She's given up on everything, and hardly talks to us, just goes through the motions. She walks up the stairs in the morning to wake us up, and it's like she's carrying a hundred-pound bag of beating hearts. During the week, after she comes home from her teaching job, she spends most of her time down the basement. She says she's "doing laundry," and probably is doing it, but mostly she wants to get away from us. She's been with junior high students all day and comes home to another gang of them. But she's really down there worrying because another one of her sisters has cancer. Her younger sister with the nine kids and the son who got drafted to go to Vietnam.

Mum comes up to stir around some hamburger in the cast iron frying pan and boil some frozen peas, but then she goes back down. On Sundays, though, still in her high heels from church, she puts on an apron and makes roast beef or pot roast and potatoes baked in the meat grease. By now my brother has left home but she invites him home for

these nice dinners. He sits with us in silence and nods at the table. He has rusty tracks up and down his freckled arms. He eats in silence and then goes off somewhere in his little green beetle car.

Yet she still brings us to the Museum of Fine Arts often. She used to bring all seven of us in the station wagon, but then just the six of us without my brother. But it's always a pack of kids that she brings. It's free so we go on most Sundays. Occasionally we go to the Isabella Stuart Gardiner Museum, the Harvard Peabody Museum or the Fogg. But mostly the Museum of Fine Arts where there are John Singer Sargeants, Rembrandts, Gauguins, Winslow Homers, the Impressionists, and more.

Sometimes we sit on a bench in the gallery and whisper like we're in church. We all love going there with Mum. She's walks around like it's her house. She knows exactly where there's a bright yellow painted floor in an early American room. She knows where the real Egyptian mummies lie and where there's an Asian garden. Once when our cousin Greg came, he fell into the neatly raked sand by mistake. At the Harvard Peabody Museum she showed us the real shrunken heads. Mum says the skulls were somehow taken out so they could be shrunken down to puppet size. Their lips had rings in them.

Mum says when she looks at a sky in an impressionist painting, "See? The clouds can be yellow and pink, can't they?" and "Notice how the shadows on the snow are purple and blue."

At the Degas ballerina Mum might say, "Look at how she's standing with her leg stretched out and her toe pointed." And I wish the little ballerina tutus that she made my sister and I still fit. Mum walks around the museums like she's in another world, one maybe she still wishes she lived in.

Part Two

Even though the nun told me not to bother to apply to college, I did apply and the only one that accepted me is Massachusetts College of Art for the Fall of 1969. The admissions offices of the few others that I applied to must have had a good laugh when they saw the marks on my high school report cards. “What the hell is this kid thinking?” I imagined they said as they lobbed my application high into the wastebasket.

At Mass Art about twenty of us were assigned to a group called F-6 where we had our core classes together. Most of the others were from Boston and the surrounding areas like I am. The state tuition was one hundred dollars per semester, so I was able to pay for it myself with my salesgirl jobs. There was an English class, an American Government class, psychology, and sociology during the first year. Oddly enough I had no problem with these because I could focus along with the sweet innocent students who made it safe to be a dreamer. There was less judgment there and it was okay to be a little odd. But interspersed with academics were the real classes like drawing, color theory, oil painting, sculpture, and life drawing.

The place smelled fabulous like the smell of Mum’s box of oil paints that she kept under the clawfoot tub on the third floor. For a while, I’d snuck in to open it and breathe in the intoxicating smell of her oil paints and inspect the soft crumpled metal tubes that she didn’t open anymore.

It was in F-6 that I met another student, Bob Wightman, my biggest inspiration for art, writing and life. I invited him to our house where he met Mum. She loved him right away, too, and I was proud of her for being my artist mother. Bob saw all of the beauty in Mum right away and he loved how she had given us freedom to make stuff in our house. He saw that she understood that making stuff could be messy and she was okay with a still life set up in the hall for a pastel drawing or papier-mache stuff on the

dining room table. She had her own sewing projects set up on her tiny Singer Featherweight machine. He saw the best in Mum and it was as if the window shade had been pulled up and the light was shining on the finest parts of her when Bob was there.

Mum had graduated from Massachusetts College of Art and she was thrilled that I had applied by myself and would attend. She seemed interested in me at first and I was proud to have Mass Art in common with her. There could have been so much to share with her. I was in the same building that she attended, but she never came over to visit it like I thought she might. So, I was mean and snotty to Mum, pretending that I didn't need her, and she was sharp and dismissive in return. But it wasn't real. I needed my mother. I needed her to help me grow up. I needed her to like me. But I couldn't process facts about my mother's own pain then.

Her younger sister had died just months before I got to Mass Art, my fourteen-year-old sister got diagnosed with juvenile diabetes that year, and Mum was a full-time junior high art teacher in Waltham. She was grieving, worried, and stressed. With Dad emotionally absent and drinking every evening to remain that way, they fought often. I hid in my hot pink painted furniture bedroom with walls covered in magazine illustrations where there was an easel set up to paint things like the un-made bed or piles of art supplies, self-portraits, paper sculptures, and origami.

And Mum spent more and more time by herself in our basement where the washing machine and ironing board were, or she was upstairs in her bed reading or saying the rosary on her clear glass beads. Her third sister had just died of breast cancer and now her brother was dying in the veteran's hospital. They were dying off one by one in their forties in only a handful of years. I see now that Mum was suffering deeply and overwhelmed with sorrow while I continued to exist clueless about what the deaths meant

for her. Not once did I ask her how she was coping as she went through the motions of making meals and washing clothes for us, her mean gang of thankless teenagers.

Once she even packed a suitcase. "I'm sick and tired of everything! I'm getting out of here now!" She was in the car about to zoom out the driveway.

I ran out and begged her to come back. She was crying as I coaxed her back into the house, carrying the blue suitcase she had packed. The one that we got with Green Stamps from the catalogue store in Newtonville.

"Now you see what goes on around here," she cried to my sister's boyfriend at the kitchen table. "I'm only here because I have nowhere to go."

He stood there helpless with his hand on Mum's shoulder watching her disintegration. She needed love and compassion from her family and there was none there for her. Her worry and irritability were constant. And her belly was growing noticeably rounder.

She must have known what was coming for her and she must have been terrified. She was in her early fifties and death had already come to the others by then.

The Spring that I was eighteen and winding down my freshman year at her alma mater, she began mentioning that she hadn't been feeling well for a while. She had called in sick and hadn't gone to school for several days.

One afternoon when I was home early from school, Mum commented to me how pretty the backyard trees were.

"Let's sit out and admire them, Martha," she said.

I made us both an iced tea and set up two folding lawn chairs, so we could sit on the back porch and admire the blossoming trees. Our back yard was in full bloom with a

cherry tree, a plum, a quince, crab apples and little flowering bushes lush and thick with blossoms; the prettiest year of all fourteen years we had lived there. We didn't talk much. Just sat and remarked on the soft fragrance of the blossoms drifting to us on the porch.

"Maybe God made these beautiful blossoms just for me," she commented.

She wasn't feeling well as she sat in her green satin long robe, sipping the tea, and she didn't look well. She mentioned that she had resigned from her teaching job. I didn't know what to say, partly because I was uncomfortable. We were kind of strangers then, at odds with each other, and I was ill at ease.

But if I could have one wish now, it would be to sit in my yard with her with all the bad years far behind us. We would sketch and drink iced tea. We'd identify birds, or watch my boys play whiffle ball. She was physically gone by the time I was twenty, drifting away from us long before that, like a loosened water plant on its way to anywhere but where we were.

When her skin began to yellow, my mother was admitted to the U.S. Public Health hospital, which our family was entitled to use because of Dad's twenty-five years in the reserves after serving in World War II.

It was surprising to see Mum in a hospital bed. She looked calm and pretty. Her bed was by a window that looked out onto the street and the front entrance to the hospital. I didn't quite know what to say to her when I first saw her. We never really talked with each other, mostly because she didn't seem to want to talk with me.

Once on a car ride, I had tried to talk to her about love and marriage. I asked, "What was it like to have Daddy ask you to marry him?"

As if I were a total stranger, she answered, "None a ya business."

The rest of the car ride home was silent, just like the knob turned to the off position on the red and white plastic radio that my Uncle John had given me one Christmas. I was stunned with embarrassment for asking.

She had tried to reach out to me as we floated further and further apart. For my senior high school prom, she offered to make a dress because buying one was not an option that year.

We looked at dress patterns at the Five and Ten and I chose a pink flowered fabric. That night she began to construct it on the dining room table. I was to cover the buttons for the back of the dress by tracing circles of cloth and centering metal button shapes in the middle of each circle and pressing a metal disk into that. It was hard to talk freely or easily with her as I put them together. There were constant awkward gaps of silence.

She was trying to do something nice for me and I was grateful, but I had been spurned so many times that I felt apprehensive around her. She caught me off-guard once by a hard slap on the face right in front of a boy who was in the back seat of our car. It came out of nowhere and I had no idea why it happened. It was hard to feel safe. She finished the dress and was proud of it because it did look very pretty on me. But still I felt awkward with her.

Another time she crocheted each of the older girls a shawl. Mine was fuchsia pink with fringe. For over twenty years after she died, that shawl was under my head as I fell asleep. I never heard Mum tell me that she loved me, but I guess her love for me was crocheted into that shawl.

We went in every day for about two weeks to visit her in the hospital in Brighton, 15 minutes away from home. Dad sometimes came with us, but mostly we were alone. He didn't talk much about what was happening. Mum seemed to be dealing with this by herself. Our parents didn't do much together. They rarely ate together and didn't really talk to each other. One Christmas, he gave her the same thing he gave his three sisters, which was identical purses, not even wrapped.

To visit Mum at the hospital, Joey, Andrea, Ellen, Terese and I piled into our mother's black 4-door sedan and either Joey or I took the wheel. We'd go after school and usually stay until it started to get dark. The hospital woodwork was all dark stained and not-often-washed linoleum floors. And green walls. Like pickle juice. Like anti-freeze. Like acid. The weirdest little details stick like flies on flypaper.

We never saw any other patients except one mysterious old man in a wheelchair out in the hall. A nurse told us that no one knew who he was because he had amnesia. He was kind of a novelty at the hospital. He didn't speak English and had somehow been picked up by the military years ago.

When it was time to go, and we got outside the building, we could look up to see Mum waving to us from her hospital window and we all waved back.

At the same time, my sister Ellen was fifteen years old and struggling with a new diagnosis of juvenile diabetes the year before. Here's how it started.

When she was fourteen, she told me that she had a terrible pain in her belly and I had laid with her on her bed to keep her company during it. It didn't occur to us to tell Mum or Dad. We looked to each other when we were sick, not our parents. Probably because they only said, "Un-huh. Go stand on your head or go outside." Dad didn't

believe in plumbers, psychiatrists, carpenters or electricians and he didn't believe in sending us to doctors. He believed that he could take care of every sickness that came along. We gargled with salt water for sore throats, drank Coke syrup for stomach aches, put iodine on cuts, and for everything else we were sent outside.

Ellen's symptoms of extreme thirst and frequent urination had already made Dad angry while they were on a long car ride to visit our former neighbors. They had to stop constantly looking for bathrooms and water. He yelled at her for inconveniencing him over and over. Afterwards my mother brought her for a rare visit to a doctor who determined that it was Type-1 diabetes.

"She didn't get that from my side of the family!" Dad said placing blame on my mother.

For months, Ellen was in and out of the hospital, where she learned how to take care of herself. She had to learn what to eat and how to inject herself with insulin. I'd go over and visit her because Mass College of Art was across the street from Joslin Clinic then. Joslin was a nationally famous teaching hospital specifically for diabetics. Patients would stay there for weeks at a time to get control of their diabetes if it had gotten out of control. There were all ages of people in there taking classes on nutrition, insulin injecting, and self-care.

Ellen made some funny friends there, mostly adolescents who would joke about diabetes and laugh, but it was no joke. She had to watch everything she put in her mouth and she had to make sure she got exercise at the correct times. At fourteen years old, she was handling her situation like a champion. When it first happened, Mum was quietly calm with her and spent time with just her. We didn't quite grasp the magnitude of this

diagnosis of a lifelong illness. It was talked about a little at home, but my parents seemed to stay in the background of it with Ellen taking the reins.

“I can drink Fresca and Tab. I can have this. I can’t have that. I can have four grams of that and three grams of that.”

Then Mum got sick a year after Ellen did.

One of the complications of Ellen’s diabetes was boils. For weeks, one must have been rising up on the inside of her thigh, and during one hospital visit to Mum, she pulled on my arm to follow her into a small bathroom across the hall from Mum’s private room.

“What’s the matter, Ellen?” I whispered.

“I have a big sore on my leg, Martha. I don’t know what to do. Can you help me?”

“Yeah, let’s go in and take a look.”

We headed into the tiny bathroom where she lifted up her skirt and showed me an enormous red boil the size of a ping pong ball on her inner thigh. By the looks of it, the abscess was starting to erupt. I had her sit on the toilet with her skirt hiked up, so I could help her, and I was careful not to scare her with my repulsion because she was scared, too. It was revolting and looked painfully sore.

With some coaxing to press on the sides to relieve some pressure, the boil burst its first explosions of pus and my little sister shrieked in pain. Her entire face twisted as she gasped.

Another two younger sisters joined us in the tiny bathroom, crowding around Ellen so that the door could hardly close all the way, and that was just when a skinny old doctor man walked by the bathroom and barged in. He pushed his way in to see what the commotion was as we are trying to help our sister.

“What’s going on in here?” he demanded.

“Our sister’s diabetic and needs our help,” one of us told him.

He was an older thin man with a severe limp and a mean look on his face. He took one look at my sister’s thigh, and instead of offering some help, which is what we needed, he ordered her out of the hospital instantly.

“Get her out of here immediately!” he said. “What the heck is she doing in here anyway? Get her out now!”

Ellen was crying in agonizing pain. The boil was dripping more and more yellow-green pus into the toilet. Her shaking hands pressed it in short pulses and each time a surge of pus dripped out, she howled.

“Get her out of here now!” he barked again. “Now! That kind of pus is contagious!”

As fast as I could, I grabbed a long line of toilet paper and tried to wrap the boil so it would at least be covered. I was crying now, too, wondering why he couldn’t have offered a band-aid, hydrogen peroxide or something? Wasn’t this a hospital? Wasn’t he a doctor? Our little sister needed our help. We were rudderless as it was. I hated that man for making Ellen leave like a bad dog, when she was a vulnerable child.

At home again, she and I were in the bathroom tending the wound. We poured hydrogen peroxide over it to drain it and clean it out. We spread Bacitracin ointment on it and gauze to cover it up. She went to school as usual the next day. I did what I could, but I know it wasn’t enough. There was no one there to help and I was not enough for her.

My heart hurts when I think of how much more I should have done. I took care of Ellen as best as my 18-year-old brain knew how. I couldn’t make sense of diabetes and I was older than she was.

A mountain of help is what my little sister needed, but a massive crater was there

instead of help. After a few months, the cluster of boils disappeared, replaced by a festering anger. Anger at diabetes and anger for no mothering as she hung on a line between girlhood and womanhood.

After two weeks in the hospital, Mum is to have abdominal surgery to figure out why she's yellow. The night before, most of us go in to see her in two cars. It's Andrea's junior prom night so we drive her in to see Mum in her chiffon prom gown. When Andrea enters the hospital room in her light green dress, Mum smiles at and how pretty her third daughter looks. Our mother is lying in a bed looking beautiful, despite her color. She's wearing her green satin robe. When we leave, we each kiss her. I start to walk out the door of her room, pause and look back at her lying there with her wavy blond hair. Our mother the artist, the mother who showed us how to listen to the wind, how to see pink and yellow in the clouds and who brought us often to show us the greatest artwork in Boston.

The afternoon of the surgery, my father and I stand in our dining room by the non-working fireplace, next to the cast-iron pot that gets filled with Halloween candy for trick-or-treaters. He's nervous as he rests one hand on the back of a rose-colored upholstered straight-backed chair. The other hand shows me a piece of paper with a strange little diagram of odd shapes and lines.

"It's cancer. Your mother has cancer. They did a by-pass around the tumor here, blah, blah, blah. Duodenum. Near the liver. A by-pass. Blah, blah, blah." I nod my head. I'm the oldest at home. I don't know how he tells the others.

Mum stays in the hospital for another two weeks. Her hair is all stringy and her face is

gray like a ghost. We still visit every day, sometimes taking the bus or the trolley. But usually the car. Nobody talks about a time-line for her. There is no future. Only the days to knock off one by one.

There have been too many deaths in our family. It doesn't register that Mum could be next. That only happened in other families. But now Mum has some kind of abdominal cancer. We wondered if it was ovarian, too, like Aunt Sara, but it was so advanced the doctors couldn't tell.

After a few weeks, Mum comes home from the hospital feeling as awful as she looks, and we do the best we can to take care of her, although it probably isn't very good care. We are on our own and it's up to us because no nurse ever comes to visit. There is no one who comes to our house to help or talk to us about the situation. Terese is thirteen, Ellen is fifteen (a stick of dynamite about to explode), Andrea is sixteen, Joey is eighteen, and I am nineteen now. We make meals for her, and Andrea, Ellen and I change the bandages on her abdomen. Ellen hopes to be a nurse someday and this is serious practice. Andrea and Ellen are only fifteen and sixteen. I'm nineteen, so it's okay for me.

The incision is the same size as a little blue glass bathtub I got at the church bazaar to put in a doll house for our dolls. But now it's just a decoration in the upstairs bathroom.

My mother's incision looks like the little cobalt blue glass tub. It's about five inches long, two inches wide and two inches deep. I fill up her incision with hydrogen peroxide, let it bubble up until it stops, then I stuff it with gauze to absorb the liquid. Next I squirt Bacitracin in it and gently put in a little bit more gauze, then finally I cover it over lightly with gauze. My mother is grateful and tells me I am brave to do it, but I don't mind.

Our mother went to the hospital and a stranger came back to live with us. The days go by and we bring food up to her. We wash the clothes. Months pass. Nobody comes over except our friends to help. We watch Mum get thinner and thinner. If older visitors come at all, they don't talk about what's happening, then they just don't come at all anymore. And no one ever brings over food. It's like they pretend it's all just fine. They might as well say, "We hardly notice that your mother is the color of French's mustard."

One friend of Joey's comes over and announces, "Get outta my way, everybody! I'm going to make you suppah!"

Pammy is a big mouth city girl from Weymouth. She rummages through the refrigerator and pokes around in the cabinets to see what she can find to make a meal. She mumbles as she kneels down reaching into the way back of the cupboards, her bottom towards us.

"Aha!" she says as she emerges with a bread pan. "I'm makin' you guys a meatloaf," she announces. "Get outta my way!"

She is just a teenager herself to step up and do that, when no adult had. She rustles around the kitchen with pots and pans, laughing and chatting. She even sets the table for everyone. It's a day when nobody wants to do anything at all but sit around listening to music. Pammy cheers everybody up with that nice dinner.

My Dad wanders into the kitchen and I know he is grateful. He had come in all sad and he lit up when he saw what she was doing. Teenagers know how to help each other, and they get a bad rap. After I saw Pammy do that, I made a promise that I would always, for the rest of my life, pitch in and help.

We need to believe that there is something ahead. I want us to believe that. I want to believe that there is stuff to look forward to, the way my Dad does. He really is an optimist even though he yells at us about going to college or we'll be losers. He just does that because he's lost himself and doesn't know what to do. I make posters and hang them all over the kitchen. I tack them over the *National Geographic* map wallpaper. The biggest one I made was of an ancient Sanskrit poem.

*Look to this day
for it is life
the very life of life.
In its brief course lie all
the realities and truths of existence
the joy of growth
the splendor of action
the glory of power.*

*For yesterday is but a memory
And tomorrow is only a vision.
But today well lived
makes every yesterday a memory of happiness
and every tomorrow a vision of hope.*

Look well, therefore, to this day.

We need to hang onto that. Me, Joey, Andrea, Ellen, Terese and my Dad. Sometimes Mum wanders down to the kitchen, but her eyes are hollow. She's like a moth or a butterfly that's losing the powder on its wings.

I've made a list of beautiful words to stick on the refrigerator just so we can think of something different from what's happening upstairs in Mum's bedroom. I draw lines on a piece of drawing paper and write at the top, "Our Favorite Words." Everybody's joining in. Even my Dad. We have words like "crunch," "slimy," "slip," and "crisp," and of course somebody put down "cellar door," the favorite of Tolkien.

As my sophomore year at Mass College of Art unrolls, I am so lost. I can't concentrate. People around me are laughing and busy with projects and I am having a hard time with complete thoughts. All winter I wear a limp tweed coat as I mechanically go to school and back home again on the train, losing my bearings in turmoil and sorrow, stripped of my skin, a girl with no head. I have only scraps of me to carry around. A shell, like my mother is a shell now. On the train, I am wooden, like a marionette. I need someone to work my strings and tell me what to do.

When Mum was a student at Mass College of Art she made two marionettes—an elf and a witch. At Halloween she'd bring out the witch and make it walk around with its wooden feet tap-tapping along the floor. The little kids would hide and screech because it was scary the way the little crooked hands pointed at them and my mother cackled for the little creature with a hooked nose. The puppets were kept in a box in the attic along with the many boxes of her precious artwork from another life. Now I need my mother to work my strings and tell me what to do. I need someone to tell me how to watch my mother die.

One particularly dreary day when feeling much too skinny and homely in horn-rimmed glasses, I head down Longwood Avenue towards the train station to get home. As if the universe wanted to say to me, "Yeah, things are bad right now, so to reiterate that, I'm going to arrange for this little bird, up here in the tree right above your head, to poop at the very moment you are walking under it."

And a dribble of white and gray bird doo found its way to the tiniest of spaces between my glasses and my cheek in a long wet line down my face. Things are shitty. Even the universe says so.

For the longest time, all that my parents cared about was that we all go to college. But the oldest has flunked out, the next dropped out, and my younger brother Joey just got kicked out. A few months after Mum's surgery, Dad somehow got him into St. Michael's College in Vermont even with his terrible grades, but Joey's college career only lasted a couple of months. He was asked to leave because of drug use.

I am so depressed about home that I can hardly talk, and I feel mute and frozen. One of my sweet flamboyant classmates at Mass Art notices and suggests that I go to see a counselor at a Mass Mental Health center a few blocks from the college. He even walks me down to get an appointment. But I can't get one for months.

I've felt an impending doom for at least a year now if not longer, like this feeling that a dark figure is lurking around. I am feeling like I want out—out of what I don't know. I want to escape. My older brother is completely wild. His friend Ed has died of a heroin overdose. Then his friend Jack dies in a bathroom stall choking on his own vomit from an overdose. Once in the bathroom at the Idler café in Harvard Square, I saw written on the bathroom wall, "Anyone know how I can get in touch with Barry McSweeney?" He's dealing drugs and I know it, but when I saw that graffiti, I was so ashamed that I rubbed it off the wall with my spit.

Joey graduated from BC High just days after we found out that Mum had cancer and he was supposed to start at St. Michael's that September. Mum was well enough to make the drive up with Dad to drop him off. But by December Joey is kicked out for drug use. Dad is devastated and doesn't know what to do with all of these wild kids and Mum being so sick.

There is a fantastic music scene in Boston and Cambridge. The Harvard Colosseum hosts two-dollar concerts during the summer and fall of 1970. Sly and the

Family Stone, Janis Joplin, Joan Baez, and others. Sometimes I'd go with either Gigsy or my older sister, but a few times she took off on me and I went home alone. I am having terrible dreams of loneliness and devils.

In a coffee shop I tell Joey that I'm so sad. Joey tells me that he has been taking LSD almost every day. He says to me, "I know what will make you feel happy, Martha. I have a little magic piece of paper for you." He pulls out his wallet and inside a folded paper is a tiny scrap of tissue paper about half the size of a pinky fingernail. "Eat it, Martha, and you will be all happy again." I want to make my younger brother happy, so I eat it.

Soon as I am walking down the street, I run into my good friend Gigsy. He's the kind of friend who knows what's going on in me before I say anything. He sees that something is different.

I tell him that there is a piano in the sky.

He says, "You're tripping, Martha."

We walk to his mother's house for dinner and I am in my own world and don't talk to anyone at the table. Afterwards we walk to the train station and I see giant lizards and snakes walking right along with us. But I'm not afraid because I'm with my friend.

Later, we are heading to my older sister's apartment in Brighton. The cars along the street look like cartoon cars and I'm sure they are made of plastic and I can walk in front of them. But Gigsy grabs my coat just before I step into the street. I spend hours at my sister's house before I begin to crash and cry because witches are cackling all around me and I'm afraid.

A few days later I walk over to Mass Mental Health hospital because I am afraid of myself. I am having dreams of taking off my clothes and jumping in water and joining a circus and getting arrested.

I am torn between getting on with my life and having a noose around my neck. I want so badly to live and get away from the problems at home. I want to bear fruit, not wither away. I am withering away if I stay. I need to be in life.

There is a friend who's working on Nantucket Island, so I go. I dance for people in my paisley dress, the one with one button on the back that's loose and exposes one bare shoulder. Along a cobblestone sidewalk, I twirl and twirl until my dress wraps me up. The people clap and I dissolve into the scenery. I am getting more and more sensitive to everything. Some things touch me to make my head go together. Like a song or a piece of cloth or a tiny object. When I see or hear or touch something like that, I know what I have to do all of a sudden. I feel something of a harmony. I must get things together.

We go near a pond in the late afternoon. If I didn't know what water was, I might think I could walk on this pond. Brown oak leaves layer the bottom of it. The water is smooth with little bugs crazily whizzing around on the surface, some in swarms, others alone in a purposeless dance.

I am so confused that I don't know or care where I am. My whole life now is a constant freak out. And I'm so sick of it. If I can get myself to do constructive things instead of things like this—just sitting here wasting time writing about how awful I feel. Suddenly I feel like I'm heading towards the earth. But only to view it. Then I zoom away in my ship. And wish I knew about all the stars.

At the end of sophomore year, I drop out, too. That's four of us who have dropped out of college now. I'm not sure if Mum will notice because I think she is too sick to detect anything like that, but she does. I am a student at her alma mater, and even though I loved it the first year, this second year I am wandering in a dark thick cloud and can't concentrate.

When I bring her a glass of water for taking a pill, she says, "You did that just to spite me, so I'd never see one of my children graduate from college."

I am drowning in blackness and I can't continue in school the way I'm feeling. It's the cancer speaking, but it really hurts that she said that. I need so much from her, but I can't ask for it or tell her what I need because I don't know. I remember that once I felt her love when she showed me how to mix tuna fish. It was just me with her and no one else.

"Drain the can in the sink, then with a fork mix it up with some mayonnaise," she told me as we stood at the kitchen sink window that looked to the west at gold and pink sunsets, by the same window where she had stopped and said, "Oooh—Listen to the wind."

She opened the can of tuna and drained it.

"We need to put in some pepper." But the shaker was almost empty, and she had to stop to fill it.

"Cover your mouth so you don't breathe in the pepper," she had said as she poured the pepper down a tiny funnel into the opened shaker. I felt her love when she told me to cover my mouth.

We stood at the same counter where she rolled out dough for Halloween cookies when there were so many little kids at once. She had us all get chairs to stand on so we

could see. We laughed that she decorated a cookie that looked like Andrea when the can of whipped cream exploded all over her.

She stopped making paintings when she had kids, probably from sadness. Although she still spoke to us like an artist would. And that to me is the big gift. She taught us to see the world as artists.

“Listen to the leaves rustling! And who would believe that a tree is Alizarin Crimson? See how the shadows are purple? And on the snow. Look at the blue shadows. I’d say that’s a Pthalo Blue.”

She showed us how to see before she got so sick that nothing mattered anymore. Now she only sighs and stares. And itches her French’s mustard yellow skin.

I’m a brick wall. I have nothing to say, like a dry curled spider, crumpled and almost dead. I’m on a lonely ship and sinking and hoping I don’t drown. Andrea, Ellen, Terese, and I don’t talk about what’s happening. We do the laundry and we cook for Dad.

One night I am making dinner while my yellow mother is sitting in a chair watching me. I am trying to make a Winter Vegetable Salad from a recipe in one of her magazines. It calls for potatoes, parsnips, lima beans and bacon. Apple cider vinegar, too. I’m wearing my hand embroidered dungarees with pink ribbons and my collections of brass keys dangling off a belt loop. Dad walks in and looks me up and down. “What the heck is in that pot and why are you wearing that outfit?” he says.

It’s a power outfit, but I don’t answer that. I ignore him.

Mum says, “She’s cooking us dinner. Leave her alone. Keep going, honey, and don’t pay attention to him.”

For once she's on my side. For once she's seeing me and noticing that I'm helping and making a delicious dinner for everybody. Anything with potatoes is good. But nobody wants to sit together at the table. They just come and go. Nobody wants to sit with Dad because after a few Dewar's, he's going to yell at us to go to college.

No one knows this—but I'm fading, losing color, lost and alone, morphing into a wooden puppet with nothing but sawdust on the inside and a mask on the outside.

Now that I've dropped out of college, I've gotten a job as a chambermaid. For a one-dollar tip I make the bed, vacuum, and marvel at the money people spend to sleep at an inn for a night. The owner keeps eucalyptus fronds in the front hallway and sitting room to keep the place smelling clean.

During one break time while sitting at a table with the other girls, I hear one of them saying that she is thinking of riding a bicycle to Canada. She's talking about tying camping gear onto the bike's rack with a bungee cord and camping along the way.

"Yeah, but I don't want to go alone," she says.

I hardly talk with anyone at this job and I don't know these girls other than working with them, but as soon as she says this stuff about riding to Canada, it sounds to me like the snap of a strong magnet on a refrigerator.

I'd never even heard of someone who had ridden a bike that far. The furthest I'd ridden was around the blocks near our house outside of Boston, riding only to get from here to there. It sounded cool to pack stuff on a bike and actually go somewhere. We'd gone car camping with Dad up in New Hampshire, but never roughing it on a bicycle. I bet I could ride like that, I think to myself. I get up to get a napkin or something, but

really to walk away and soak in this idea of riding a bike to Canada. I stand for a minute over at the side of the room with my back to the girls and my heart racing.

How does a person know what they need? Is it recognizing something familiar, that simply feels right? Is it a hole that has a certain shape and when you see the shape to plug up the hole, you just know? Is it a very tiny “click” sound that a soul hears?

Whatever it is, I knew that I needed this.

I go back to the table where this girl is sitting.

“I’d love to ride a bicycle to Canada,” I say.

“Then let’s do it,” she says back to me without a smile.

I don’t even know this person, but she looks like the ticket to run away. Her name is Jaycee from western “Massachoo-zetts,” pronouncing it differently than I do. I’ve never been anywhere other than the Boston area, New Hampshire, or Cape Cod. I know nothing of the world. Although once Dad drove our family to Niagara Falls on the way to trading houses for a week with another huge family in Ontario, Canada, but that was a long time ago.

The drive took thirteen hours with nine of us in a station wagon. Thanks to the goody bags of crayons, coloring books and bags of candy that CarlyBoy and Aunt Bernice packed for each of us, one of the few memories I have of that trip are of Joey and Ellen throwing up on either side of the car simultaneously. The wind whipped the puke so thin on the windows that it looked foggy outside for hours.

This girl, Jaycee, doesn’t talk much at the job. She’s mysterious and cold, but I don’t care because she looks like a chance to get away from the sadness at home.

Jaycee chatters about special bags called “panniers” that could be attached to a rack on the back wheel of the bike, something I’d never seen or heard of before. The more she

talked the more I wanted to do this. Right then, we begin to make plans. First, we decide when to go on this trip, second, what we will need for a long odyssey, and third, when to take an overnight test ride.

We exchange addresses and phone numbers and agree to meet the following week to talk more. Having something else to think about other than the havoc at home had me feeling alive, something that I hadn't felt for a long time.

Just thinking about the possibility of the ride is quenching my thirsty soul. It was a key to escape from the same cage of sorrow that jailed my mother when everyone around her was dying, the cage that stole her happiness and her passion.

I couldn't repeat what happened to my mother. Her sadness stole everything from her. She was a talented artist and draftsman, able to draw anything beautifully; it broke my heart to look at the work she did as a young woman. She was an artist, graduating from the same college that I withdrew from when the curtain of doom dropped on our family. How could any of us hold onto our hearts and souls when we have two brothers hooked on every drug they could get their hands on to use and to sell, and when we have a father living for in his gallon jug of Dewar's at 3:55 pm every day, in time for his TV show. And how about throwing into that mix, a mother dying a slow death? Let's see who deals with all that and comes out of it intact.

Every afternoon at four o'clock, Dad sits in his Barcalounger in the den, watching Merv Griffin. Merv is like Dad's best friend. Sitting by himself with his Dewar's in his hand, he laughs and laughs. It's the one thing every day that he looks forward to doing. About ten minutes before four every day, he gets himself ready. He starts to crack the ice

out of one of the maybe ten ice cube trays in our freezer. *Chu-chunk, chu-chunk, chunk, chunk, chunk*. It's like the sound of a front loader dumping rocks into a dump truck.

We have two staple items in the freezer: ice and ice cream. The rest are a few bags of frozen vegetables and steak tips. Dad's crazy for "tips." He buys them up at the Air Force base and eats them every day.

Once I saw him sitting in the den with the TV off. He was alone and talking. Probably to God, because his eyes were kind of looking up to the ceiling and rolling at the same time. His head went from side to side and he had worry all over his face. One hand going this way, and his other hand going that way, and his head going from side to side. He was muttering.

I know that he's doing the best he can. He's overwhelmed and has no idea how to do any better than he's already doing. I always wish that he would lighten up on the Dewar's, but that is not going to happen. He tried to give it up for Lent a few times. He sat in his chair with a root beer and watched his shows, white-knuckling his glass. I'd sit with him watching Merv to keep him company, but I didn't believe he got to three days on the root beer before he said, "Aw, The heck with it." And almost ran into the kitchen to his Dewar's.

When he watches me make his drinks, he says, "Spill it over. Spill it over," as I pour his Dewar's into a "jigga"—Boston-talk for *jigger*. He's big into using a "jigga." "Always use a 'jigga', kids. Always measure your drinks. That way you don't get 'stink-o'," he says.

"And turn off the lights when you leave a room. We're not millionaires."

Dad keeps on moving forward, selling insurance—life, homeowners and auto—in his office next our living room. We're not allowed to make noise during his office hours while his secretary is in there and while my mother lies in bed upstairs. He used to advertise his insurance on our Sacred Heart School book covers. His ad was on the back, while on the front was Martin E. Conroy Funeral home. On all of our books, for each of our subjects, for every hour of every day at school, we studied the world between the layers of insurance and a funeral parlor. I try to ask my dad about insurance.

“Hey, Dad, what's a deductible?”

“Well, a deductible is a deductible. You got your deductible.”

“What's a premium, Dad?”

“Well, let's see. You got your premium. A premium is a premium.”

More life lessons from my dad.

Although Jaycee and I meet periodically at her house in western Massachusetts and again at my house to make plans, I still don't feel comfortable around her. It's partly me. I am socially inept around her. On one visit out there, we go to a gathering at the home of her friends where I feel completely out of place.

While sitting with them at their table I am in my own world and unable to join in the conversation because I feel invisible. A blood red amaryllis blooms its flower the size of the mouth of a trumpet, the biggest blossom I've ever seen up until 1971. It is the centerpiece on the honey colored pine table where I am sitting with people who know each other well laughing and talking easily while I sit separate and staring at the deep red blossom that doesn't seem real. But nothing seems real. I'm nineteen-years-old and a virgin in leather pants I'd made for myself a few months before. My mother is dying, I'm

thinking.

A woman at the table is reminiscing with her ex-husband, a skinny man in purple clothes and frizzy hair.

“Remember that time we smeared butter all over each other and we smelled like popcorn?”

Everybody laughs and the conversation turns to their food co-op and buying honey by the pound and how the government assistance powdered milk and cheese are awful. Plants hang in macramé slings over an indoor jungle of ferns and geraniums in red and pink blooms. There are big jars of pasta and lentils on open shelves. Small clear jars of herbs and loose tea. The space is open and smells like herbs and wood smoke. Everything has a warm glow, but I sit like a wordless lump. No one notices when I escape into the bathroom for as long as I think I can.

The bathroom is like a grotto. It's tiled with gray uneven sheets of patio flagstone on the walls and floor. The shower water has puddled on the stone floor in black shapes. Asparagus ferns and philodendrons trail down from the ceiling skylight. I stay in the moist cavern of the bathroom for a long time, feeling a prayerful soulfulness. Someday I'll have a bathroom like this, I think to myself before walking back to the table where no one knows my mother is dying.

After my chambermaid job ends, I find a new one at the Harvard Coop in Harvard Square. It's a forty-minute train ride into work every day and I feel like I'm dragging around a duffle bag of my guts to get there. I lug it on the train to my job at the Harvard Coop where I work in the money room on the mezzanine where I have two responsibilities. One is standing at a window in accounts receivable, where I accept

checks from customers who are paying their bills and mark it in a book.

This is what I am told to say to each of them after they hand me their payment behind a low glass partition: “Your cancelled check is your receipt.”

But I have no idea what that means because I’ve never had a checkbook. So, I just repeat what my supervisor tells me to say, “Your cancelled check is your receipt.” Then the customer walks away because they know what I’m talking about.

My second responsibility is to tally checks with an adding machine. They don’t know who they are asking to do this job because every time I add up twenty-five checks, I get a different number on a tape that comes out of the adding machine. The manager checks the columns on my tapes and since I usually have three different totals, we take the one that matches hers.

All winter I listen to the older women talking while we work and each of them is fascinating. The four or five of them have worked together for many years. One of them is a whimsical woman from England who won a jingle contest with the prize being a cruise. Another seems so innocent and has never heard of “Purgatory” before—so that got explained. Another’s son lost his arm somehow. And still another tells me that I have “peaches and cream skin.” They are all so sweet and motherly to me, giving me advice on life and boys.

“Make sure that you wash your hands before touching your face,” warns one of the older women working in there with me. “I got an eye infection once from all this dirty money.”

When they talk to me like that, I realize how little my own mother has spoken with me because she has been too sad and overwhelmed to talk much to me. I drag my

bag of guts to work every day, trying to keep them contained in the bag, but they keep falling out, leaking out whenever I look into someone's eyes in the money room. It's an effort to hide my sadness. It keeps seeping out and I can always tell when someone sees it by the way they look too deeply at me. Eyes are the window of the soul, I've heard, and I don't want anyone looking in my window.

The ladies are excited that I am going to ride to Canada on a bicycle. After seven months with them, when it's time to leave the job and start the trip, they give me a going away present. They've all pooled their money and bought me a windbreaker for the bike trip. I missed my mother even though I saw her every day. I missed the mothering that she wasn't able to give because of her sorrow.

When I finally decide to tell my family that I am going to ride a bicycle to Canada, with a girl I don't know, they are indifferent. Dad, Andrea, Ellen, Terese and I are at the table in the kitchen eating dinner with *Mr. Ed* or *F-Troop*. Joey is off somewhere. My mother is upstairs in bed.

Dad's says, "You're going to get big legs. Men don't like big legs."

He mutters his next comments as he rearranges the food on his plate, "Get yourself a meal ticket. Just get yourself a meal ticket. All girls need a meal ticket. Find someone to marry."

I wonder if they'll miss me. I wonder if they're hearing what I am saying. I wonder if this will make any difference to them whether I go or not, but this makes my decision a little easier.

I had worried if it was a good idea to go at all with my mother so sick. But I am feeling like a spineless blob standing at the edge of a swamp with a pack of dogs after

me. Do I jump into the swamp only to get covered with muck and possibly drown? Or do I hop on a bicycle to escape the wild dogs and find help for the others? Or do I get forced into the swamp and get poisoned by the crud and sickening stench?

To an outsider's eyes, it probably looks like the worst time to leave for a bike trip, but I must find my energy. I am about to step out at the worst time of my life to find it. But I have to find it in my own way, in my own time. To hell with what this looks like to anyone else. They're not walking this. I am.

I've studied up on what to pack for a bike odyssey and I check in every few weeks with Jaycee by phone. We are estimating that it will take about six weeks to ride. She's buys a new brown Raleigh for under a hundred dollars. Mine is a white Japanese "Fuji" from a shop in Central Square, Cambridge.

My older sister's friend works at this shop and tells me that everybody who works there, owner included, are using and selling cocaine out of it. Drugs are getting way too close to me and I want nothing to do with them after watching what hard drugs are doing to my family, but I got a deal on the bike and paid \$175.00—a lot for a ten-speed. I don't ask my sister if she's using drugs, because I don't want to know.

She and I have started to go our separate ways mostly because we don't know what to do about my mother's sickness and we don't talk about it. She's moved into Boston and has her own group of friends and never comes home. I have mine, although all of them are away at college except me. I am at home.

I'm worried about being away this long while my mother is so sick. I go over and over the idea. Even though I now have the bike, I worry about the timing of this. I don't think I

can change anything for my mother or for anyone in my family, but I feel like I'm standing too close to a whirlpool or a waterfall. I have a distinct sensation of danger. Like I need to protect myself from the explosion or the fire. I need to get oxygen so I can help the others and drag them away from the danger when it comes.

I ask myself, "What can I do to save my mother? How can I help her? How can I change anything? How can I comfort her?"

The answer keeps coming back to me, "I can't. There is nothing that I can do to change anything outside of myself. The only thing I can change is myself." Mum isn't bedridden. She wanders around the house soundlessly in clothes that hang from her frame. She pretends to eat. Pretends to watch television. But mostly she's silent.

Our plan is to go on a ten-mile test ride for a night in western Massachusetts at some park with Jaycee and her boyfriend, Paul. My sister Andrea drives me the hour and a half to Athol with my bike and gear in the back seat.

On the way, we rescue a turtle on the road. Andrea decides to bring him home and name him "Rte. 32." At Jaycee's house, Andrea and I hug and say our goodbyes, and as I watch her drive off, I want it to be my sister going with me, not these strangers.

"We'll be bringing our own tent and zipping our sleeping bags together," Jaycee announces, which is new to me, a virgin. I would stay alone in my \$19 orange tent from King's. In my research I've read that rubbing candle wax along the seams will help keep the rain out. I'll be curled up in Dad's Army mummy bag alone.

Both Jaycee and her boyfriend have a grudge against a world that's treating them unfairly. Neither of them has a job, yet both receive government issued food and are insulted by and complain about the quality of that food, especially the cheese and

powdered milk that they get for nothing. It's perplexing to me why a young able-bodied childless couple needs government issued food even when she can buy a brand-new bike, but I don't ask. The two of them are the exact same compact height, like little salt and pepper shakers.

Neither of them ever smiles. I wonder about spending a couple of days with these two people I don't know at all and don't really like. By default, I become an invisible mute third wheel accompanying them on a camping date.

After gathering the food and gear we'll need for a one-night test ride, we pack our bikes and begin the ride along winding narrow country roads. There are stone walls alongside the road and the trees are wearing the brilliant lime green leaves of early Spring. I'm wearing the windbreaker that the ladies from the money room gave me to keep out cold. It's frightening to start this and I have no idea what the name of the park is that we are heading towards. I don't know where I am, but it's where I need to be.

The two of them ride way up ahead of me without looking back, and I just follow. I have no idea where we are, and I don't care. Even if we are riding on another planet I don't care. I've been lost and lonely, and though I love my siblings, we have each gone off on our own, like little animals who are sick and crawl into a tiny space where no one can find us and see the misery we are in.

None of us have any idea what is about to happen in our house, but there's a feeling of a bomb about to explode. In 1971, there is no hospice. No one has spoken to us about what's happening to our mother. And we don't want to know. So, we'll pretend that everything is fine which is hardly the reality. Our mother is neon yellow because of the cancer that's inside of her and she's looking like a scarecrow. We go along with

everyday life, pretending that the floor of the house is intact when it is really rusted out, rotted out, moth-eaten and melting away until we are all falling through the holes, slipping away. Every one of us has nothing to stand on.

The skies are looking sinister. The ten miles of riding on our test bike ride finishes up fast. Too fast. Turns out it's nothing to ride ten miles on a 10-speed bike. Jaycee and Paul have already arrived at the park and when I arrive they continue talking with each other as if I'm not there. I don't know how to break into their conversation, so I just follow them into the park to look for a place to set up our tents. Mine is set up about the length of a classroom away from theirs because I don't want to intrude on their camping date.

We sit together at the picnic table near their tent while I rummage through my canvas saddlebag for the little bent one-dollar camp stove that I bought from a sale table at Eastern Mountain Sports. We fill a small pot with water to boil some noodles. It's awkward sitting with these two people I don't even know, and me not being much of a conversationalist. I explain that my mother has cancer, and they look at me with blank expressions. They don't talk much, and we eat the noodles while I'm so aware that I don't belong here, and the loneliness eclipsing who I ever was.

Just as we finish eating, a sudden rain comes in hard and fast. They race to their tent. I grab my stuff and sprint to mine. When I crouch down to crawl inside, I remember that as long as I don't touch the sides, the tent should keep me dry. No fly came with this cheap tent, so I need to be careful getting in. This rain doesn't make its entrance gently.

Right from the start it blasts down as the heaviest loudest rainstorm I've ever experienced inside a tent. Then the thunder and lightning cracks, rolls and explodes with a vengeance overhead. The thunder comes at the same time as the lightning and I'm sure

that I'll be struck. Never have I experienced rain so fierce and powerful right overhead.

Alone in my tent, I start to cry, and wonder how much worse can everything get? This is the most scared I've ever been in my life and the loneliest, too. The storm goes on for hours, and there is nothing else to do but curl up in the mummy bag as close to the middle of the tent as I can get because the rainwater is pooling at the sides.

Just when the storm begins to move away, I hear Jaycee and Paul come near the tent. "Wow! Intense," they say.

"Yeah," I say, trying to act casual, like this happens all the time.

"We had to get out and pee," they answer and run back to their tent.

A month or so later, right before we leave for the real bike trip in the middle of June, I buy a six-inch-tall thick green candle. It's all I can think of to give to Mum before I go. I wrap it in tissue paper and when she is sitting by the fireplace with Dad, I sit down by her feet and present it to her.

"Mum, I know I shouldn't be doing this, but I have to. I am hoping that you'll light this for me while I'm gone."

She takes the candle and opens it in slow motion because that's how she does everything now.

"You know, I might not be here when you get back, Martha."

"Please, Mum, please light it for me while I'm gone. I'll be back. I'll come back."

I hug my yellow mother as she sits in her chair by the fireplace.

"I will. I'll light it for you. Be careful now, won't you?"

An hour later as I'm about to get a ride with Andrea to the meeting place with Jaycee, Dad says he'll drive us instead and I kiss Mum one more time.

I wish Dad would stay out of this and just say goodbye, but he insists on driving us a little north of the city. We remove the front wheels of our bikes to fit them into the back of my Dad's station wagon and we head for Route 1 north.

"We probably could have figured this out, Dad. But thanks."

It's rained earlier in the foggy June morning, and the pavement along Rte. 1-A is black with moisture, but not shiny with blatant water. Just wet and black. Two ten-speed bikes are packed into the back of my father's station wagon, two 20-year old girls, four bags stuffed with camping gear and my father at the wheel. He's insisted on driving us a little north of Boston out of the city to start riding. Now he doesn't say anything.

"This looks good, Dad."

"You sure?"

"Yup."

He pulls onto shoulder of the winding thin road by a stone wall. He's very quiet as we unpack our bikes from the car and set them up on the side in the light drizzle. Now we each attach the front wheels back onto the bikes, because we had to take them off the frames to fit them in the car. I strap the canvas saddle bags onto the sides of my back-wheel rack, then with a bungee cord, I tie on the orange tent and the Army mummy sleeping bag. There's no kick-stand on the bike, so I lean it against the stone wall.

When I look back at my father, he looks small and alone standing by the car. Home has been brutal for all of us and my heart is heavy about leaving, but I know that if I stay, I might drown. I feel like I'm about to row a tiny boat hundreds of miles away to rescue my stranded crew. I need to rescue my family, shipwrecked on the island called "Mother is Dying." And I'm off to get the real help we need because my family is unravelling, and I can't change anything by staying home. Maybe if something changes

in me, I can encourage the others and keep them from getting caught in the undertow that's licking our shore.

My father is standing on the roadside watching me. The wet road winding up ahead is full of risk and danger. But I need to believe that there is promise there. I need to believe that there is more to life than what it is. Right then, I couldn't say, "My mother is dying," because I have no idea what death brings with it. I only know that we are watching her wither endlessly. Waiting and watching with no one talking about what's happening. We know that she has cancer. We know people die from it. But no one said out loud, "Your mother is dying and when she does die, it will rock you to your core." No one said that.

I look at my father, small and straight-faced. I put my arms around him and tell him I'll call every few days from some phone booth along the way.

I mount the bike, heavy with what I'll need for the next six weeks and wobble off down the road heading for Canada with no helmet, no guidebook, and with a girl I don't know at all.

Part Three

About an hour into the bike ride, I get a flat tire on the back wheel where the derailleur gears are. I've never had a flat before and have never changed a tire. I've watched my father change a tire, but I never did it. Jaycee stops up ahead to wait, on a rock, but doesn't come back where I am stooping by my bike, shaking with loneliness and panic in the light mist. When I look down at the gravel on the side of the road, the bits of tar and glass, the small rocks and sand; my fears are magnified because I feel like that minutia on the side of the road.

To fix the back wheel I need to take all the camping gear off the back of the bike before taking off the wheel. Then with a deep breath, so I don't cry, I figure it out, pump the tire back up, re-attach the wheel to the derailleur and tie the stuff back on the rack. It's tricky but I do it. With closed eyes, I thank God for staying with me, then I ride up ahead where Jaycee is sitting and looking up ahead, not back at me.

The rain subsides a little, but not for long. In less than an hour we are in Gloucester where I catch up to Jaycee who has stopped to tell me that we probably ought to look for a campground to get out of the rain. There's a small market nearby to buy some food. She picks out her own food and I choose Lipton noodle soup, cheese, saltines and a Hershey bar.

Whenever we go into a store, we need to find a sturdy spot to lean our bikes outside. Mine has no kickstand and the bike is too heavy to stand up on one anyway. I wonder for the first time if we need to worry about locking them, but neither one of us brought a lock and besides, who would take off on a bike with so much stuff tied to it? With my small plastic billfold of travelers checks I hand over the first one to pay for my own food.

“Is there a campground nearby?” I ask the cashier.

“Yes,” she replies, “Come with me and I’ll point you in the direction. Where you headed?”

“Canada,” I say.

“That’s inspiring. You girls go for it.”

The two of us go outside with her and listen carefully to the way she points this way and that. This cashier is the first of the many curious and kind people I meet. In 1972, there are not many long-distance bicycle riders and the few that are out there, are not female. My canvas bags are re-arranged and balanced with the new food I’ve put in, and we get ready to head off in the direction that the cashier’s given us. A couple of kids holding the hands of their parents, are entering the store just then, stare at us, then at our bikes.

“Where you headed?” the father comments.

“Canada,” I answer.

“All the way to Canada? That’s pretty far,” he says, blowing a light whistle and studying the bikes as we are arranging the stuff. Other people stare at us with our cumbersome bikes and I feel both brave and a spectacle. Rolling away from the market sure calls attention to us, which I’m not used to, and it’s uncomfortable.

Jaycee and I mount our bikes and wobble off. In ten minutes, we’re rolling down the gravel driveway to the Gloucester campground. The rain is lighter now as we dismount and lean the bikes by some trees. A fat man comes out of a screen door of the office and waddles near us as he eyes us with suspicion.

“Where are you girls coming from?” he demands.

“Just sixteen miles south,” I say.

“And where do you think you’re going?”

“Canada,” Jaycee says.

“Ha!” he laughs. “You have got to be kidding me. Hey!” he yells to someone inside the office.

“We got some girls out here who think that they are riding their bikes to Canada! Ha!”

It’s an older woman he’s yelled to as he goes back into the office, slamming the door after himself. She comes out squinting and looks us over.

He comes back out saying, “Canada. Ha! So, what do you want here?”

“A campsite,” I say.

“You by yourselves?”

“Yes.”

“Canada. Ha. You’re never going to make it. Never make it. Ridiculous. Two girls riding bicycles to Canada. Ha!” he mutters as he pulls out a form for us to fill out.

He takes our money for the campsite after we sign in and tells us where our campsite is. Even though we haven’t ridden that far, I’m exhausted, mostly from fear. We walk the bikes to the site and find that it’s covered in chunky gravel, the kind you’d find on a gravel driveway. There’s no way we can pitch a tent on that. We can’t pay money for this.

I walk back and I say politely, “Um, the site is all gravel. We can’t pitch a tent on that.”

“Oh,” he yells back to the woman in the back of the office. “We have some picky girls here who think they are riding to Canada and they don’t like their campsite.”

The woman says, “Why did you give them that one? That’s for trailers.”

“They think they’re riding to Canada and they are getting picky,” he says.

“Give them another one,” the woman says with a coldness to him.

The new campsite is soft wet dirt under pine trees with a picnic table. It’s too damp to build a little fire, so I untie the tent from the back of my bike and set it up. Jaycee says very little to me still. I try to be polite to her, but I don’t say much either. I haven’t even been away from home all that much. With my mother so sick, I’ve lived at home for my two years of college before I dropped out.

It’s raining again so we crawl into the tent early and listen to the rain on the tent, careful not to touch the sides. I have no mat to put underneath my sleeping bag, but it doesn’t bother me. Sometime I’ll find a thick newspaper to put underneath, but it’s fine now to fall asleep right on the grey floor of the tent.

One thing that I splurged on was suede shorts. They probably cost more than the tent, now that I think of it. My thinking was that I wouldn’t have to wash them, but also because when I had them on I felt the freedom and toughness of a cowgirl and I’d wanted to feel like a cowgirl for a long time. The suede of the shorts emits power, although I made no connection between leather and suede with animals, which I love. I guess I needed to know what it felt like to be a tough girl in tough spot, as if I needed practice for losing a parent. But I didn’t know this yet.

Since Jaycee isn’t talking, I wander off alone to the campground bathroom to wash out my underwear and shirt, squeezing out the excess water to lay near the sleeping bag inside the tent. It feels good to be walking around under the trees down the pathways by the other campsites. Most of the other campers are in trailers or large tents.

Our campsite looks lonely and bare without a car nearby when I return to it. Jaycee is lighting up my one-dollar camp stove when I return. She is cooking her food

using her mess kit. After she removes her pan from the stove, I boil water for my noodle soup. It doesn't even occur to her to wait for me to cook together. Early on, I accepted that this would be the way we would do things on this trip and went about taking care of my own food. She doesn't seem mad at all; she just doesn't seem to notice me. She goes about her business as if she were all by herself.

Without much to do and with no one to talk with, I study the page I'd torn out of a book of *Best Bicycle Routes*. We are riding on part of a 180-mile route listed in the book, from Boston to Bar Harbor, Maine. When we reach Bar Harbor, we'll decide where to go next.

While there is still a little light, I write a letter to my mother. I want her to know what I am doing each day. I tell her about the rain and the fog, but I don't tell her about this strange person I am riding with.

I hope that Mum is lighting the thick green candle each night. I chose green so that I would see her again. But what I thought was a color of life, was not the color of my mother. I pictured her sitting in the living room like a golden phantom, staring ahead, thinking about God-knows-what. Leaving a family of seven wild kids maybe—adolescents who don't seem to have any clue what is about to happen? And me, the one she had asked a number of times to wash her three dresses that hung over the railing upstairs—I kept forgetting to do that.

You know, I might never see you again. Never see you again. Never see you again.

It pained me that she said that. We did not have a close relationship, yet I loved my mother, and wasn't leaving because I didn't care. It was to survive. I didn't know why I knew this, but I did. There was nothing that I could do at home to change anything.

My father sat with her as often as he could. He had his insurance office right in our house, so he was right there.

After crawling into my sleeping bag, I say good night to Jaycee. She looks at me without saying anything, rolls over, and turns out her flashlight. As crazy as I thought my family was, I hope that I will never end up this one-dimensional. I hope that she is simply shy, but it's awkward. Her family is just as rude as she is. I stayed with them the night before we left on the test ride. They didn't talk or wait for people to sit down together for the supper that her mother made. They all did whatever and whenever they wanted. Nobody laughed. Her brother tried to pass by his sister to get to the living room, so he shoved her hard to go by her. Then she punched him. If they were little kids, it would be understandable, but they were all in their twenties. They seemed like they were from another planet because the behavior made no sense to me.

The next morning is overcast with some sun poking out from between gray clouds. I walk down to the fat man's office to hang my damp clothes on a clothesline before the sun disappears again, when another biker rolls in. And then another, within ten minutes of the first, but both of them are riding alone. Ken is a businessman who is separating from his wife and Rob is a carpenter trying to decide if he should get married. Both men are on a long trek trying to figure something out, which is what I am doing, too.

Before I left, I had bought another cheap item that I thought would help me on the trip. It was a broad brimmed straw hat that tied under my chin. I had never been much for hats, but like the suede shorts, it felt good to wear it. The hat is on my head when I walk down

to the campground office to hang up my damp clothes in the passing burst of sunshine. From the little grassy lawn near the clothesline, somebody yells out,

“You look like a cornball in that hat!”

It’s the younger guy, Rob, sitting by his bike on the grass. All his stuff is in a black trash bag bungeed to his bike rack.

Was I threatening to this guy? First the camp ground owner, then this guy. Why do these guys feel like they need to put me down? I didn’t ask for an opinion on my straw hat. Am I a sitting duck for insults? Rob stretches out on the grass, watching me hang up my damp clothes as we make small talk and exchange hometown names and destinations.

“I like this hat, you know,” I say defending myself.

“But it’s corny,” he says with a smirk on his face and rolls his eyes. “Ha! Why do you need to wear a hat like that anyway? Ha!”

I feel caught between explaining myself and telling him to shut up. I am a girl riding my bike long distance and have possibly ridden as far as he had that day. Without saying so, I decide that I don’t need to explain myself to anyone.

Back at the campsite, Jaycee is packing up her stuff and tying it on her bike. Earlier I’d taken down the tent and hung it from the trees to dry in the fleeting sun before packing it in its bag. The sky is grey again as I roll up the tent and strap the canvas bags back onto the bike. I want to make sure that they are equal in weight today, even packing one flip-flop in each bag. Without a word, Jaycee has already mounted her bike to ride to the front office for checkout. I tie my sneakers and watch her ride away.

Then I, too, mount my bike in the fine rain and head towards the office for one thing only. I want the address of the fat man because I will be sending him a post card. From Canada.

Jaycee rides way up ahead and I can feel my legs shake and heart pound as I pedal. The drizzle is turning to spitting rain, so I pull over to unpack a hooded rain poncho and pull it on. She pedals on, so I pedal harder to catch up to her. She doesn't seem to notice that I'm not behind her and she doesn't look back. Eventually she comes to a halt so she can pull out her poncho out of her bags and I get closer. But she hops back on her bike and carries on without even looking back for me.

I'm focused on the road and the pebbles on the side. Cars and trucks whizz by and the faster and bigger they are, the more my bike shimmies. When we stop later to pick up some food for supper, I may make an adjustment in the packs because it's important to balance what's in the saddlebags. If one side is heavier than the other, it would be easy for me to fall off and possibly fall into the traffic. Jaycee is riding way up ahead again and I need to keep her in sight because she's holding the map. I am simply following along, not caring where we are going really, even if we are pedaling to the moon. I am on this ride to feel something, to feel alive, and to believe that there is a life ahead.

The first hills are hard to ride, and with all the stuff packed on the bike, gravity is pulling at me, forcing me to pedal harder. My chest hurts from breathing hard. To give the bike more power, I stand on the pedals sometimes to push them down, so I can get to the top of the hill. I tell myself that it can't always be this hard. That I'll get stronger in time. But that thought is hard to hold onto while I'm gasping for breath. At the top of the hill, I pull

over to gulp some air and take a sip from the water bottle attached to the bike frame. My hands are shaking from gripping the handlebars, and it's hard to hold the bottle.

The houses on the shady moist road are close together at first, then they start to thin out with large fields and lawns between them. The air smells fresh and clean until a truck's acrid exhaust leaves behind its caustic taste in the back of my throat. Then it's moist and clean again. The rain has made the grass greener and the air foggier. In a marsh, I notice a bird sitting on the tippity top of a tall dry cat tail. It's a red-winged blackbird who scans the wetland around it like the captain of a ship, balancing on the dried plume of the stiff reed. Riding by, I wonder if being up high like that makes it more vulnerable to danger.

As I think about home, it sinks in that there's no help from anyone. My two older siblings have moved away, and they stay away, rarely coming home. They show up to check in, but then they leave right away. And here I am far away now, too. I should be home with the other younger ones, but when I'm there, I feel like a piece of furniture. I help out and cook meals for them, but I want to be ready. For what, I can't even say out loud.

As I'm riding over the sand and tar in the breakdown lane of Route 1-North, I think about a Christmas Eve just a few years before:

"You can borrow the car if the three of you go," my father is saying. My older brother twists his head around to me.

"Hey, you want to go to midnight Mass with us?"

He and my older sister often hang out together. They are standing in the hall near my usually mad father.

"Midnight Mass? Yeah!" I say with enthusiasm.

They never ask me to do anything with them. My brother hardly ever even talks to me. He's just gotten his license and looks for any excuse to borrow the car, and my beautiful older sister's fifteen.

I'm fourteen and have always gone to Mass on Christmas morning with my mother and the four younger kids, so I jump at this. He hangs with a gang that drinks and smokes cigarettes. Not only does my sister have hair down to her waist, huge brown eyes and a line of boys waiting in line to date her, but she's in the top sought-after clique. I have buck teeth and one friend. But all three of us would go to Mass together. At midnight. So, I start to plan my outfit right away. This particular Christmas, my big wish is that a boy will like me. Any boy. I feel so homely whenever I'm near my sister. She has huge eyes and perfect teeth like one of the models in *Seventeen* magazine.

We always get a real Christmas tree and decorate it only a couple of days before Christmas. It's set up in our living room by a window near the green couch. Right before they asked me to go to church with them, I was sitting on the couch with my eyes squinty so that all the colored lights on it look like they have rays coming out of them. Hopeful that some boy will like me this year, I decide to pray for that at Mass. Now the Christmas spirit is alive in me more than ever as I squint and make the colored rays splay out of each light on the tree.

With my own money I had bought a grey wool coat for myself in Filene's basement, this great store in downtown Boston that sells dirt cheap quality stuff. It has fifteen buttons up the front. So many buttons that Uncle John asked me if I need a passport to get in and out of it. Between babysitting and my job at the church rectory, I have money saved so I paid for it myself. Carol is my one real-life friend, and *Seventeen* magazine is the other "friend." From cover to cover the magazine is full of fashion photos

that I collect in a folder, then I staple the illustrations all over the walls of my new bedroom.

This season in *Seventeen*, grey and navy blue are the highlighted fashion colors, so, I've also bought some navy low pumps and navy stockings to go with my new gray coat.

Carol and I both work at the church rectory. We serve dinner to the priests, answer the phone, record the parishioner's donations in a ledger, and sell Mass cards when people request them for the sick or the dead.

Father Doocey, who watches out for misfits, must have noticed that Carol and I weren't in the in-crowd in the high school and he asked us if we wanted a job at the rectory. And so, four days a week, we work there and get a paycheck.

By 11:15 pm I'm all dressed and ready, waiting by the Christmas tree in the living room. When my brother and sister say it's time to leave, I follow them outside to the car. They sit up front and I'm in the back seat, but proud to be going with them. There isn't any talk on the ride.

My brother pulls in front of the church to let us out. My sister walks ahead of me where a crowd of her friends are standing. As soon as we get there, and without looking back for me at all, my sister disappears in the crowd of kids who are moving towards the parking lot.

I stand in my grey and navy outfit by the door as families are entering the church. I move along with them, pretending that I know where I'm going and find a seat off to the side. There are a few empty pews ahead of me and a few behind. My face twists in an expression that I hope looks like concentration, but a tear pushes its way out. There's one tissue in my pocketbook and I hold my head up to act like it's perfectly normal to be

alone here at Midnight Mass without my family. I want to be invisible, but my heart is pounding so loudly, I am sure it's making me stand out even more.

The Mass continues as I try to figure out what to do. I drop a quarter in the collection basket when it comes around, with a prayer that my siblings will come back.

Mass ends, people wish each other a Merry Christmas as I move towards the door and to the outside where I had last seen my sister. Fewer and fewer people come out of the church, then no one. The door locks from inside. The stained-glass windows go black. The last car leaves the parking lot, and it's just me.

Too embarrassed to walk through Newton Center where someone might see me all alone on Christmas Eve, I start walking the back way, down Crescent Street, then Pleasant Street. I have no gloves or hat and my navy pumps are kind of new, so it's hard to walk as fast as I want to at 1:30 in the morning on cold ground. A few houses still have Christmas lights on in the windows, but mostly it's dark and gray as I walk the mile home on the empty streets. What kind of a loser is walking around alone in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve? I try to walk fast but the bottoms of my new shoes are slippery on the frozen ground. It's the first time in my life that I'm glad it's not a White Christmas.

Our house is never locked, so when I reach home, I quietly sneak upstairs and slip into bed feeling as if I'd been kicked. I lay utterly ashamed and owned that shame for a long long time.

I think about this as my legs pedal my bike north of Gloucester with my long brown hair blowing behind me. I'm the oldest at home, even though I'm not at home now. I'm riding my bike to Canada instead of helping my family.

Really, I am helping though. I'm getting emotional supplies for my younger brother and three sisters to get through whatever is about to happen. Our house is like a swamp where we wade around in the muck and it's up to me to help them find the way out of it. If I go ahead of them, I can show them how to get there when I return.

Mum's been sick for a year and a half now. Dad takes her for rides in the car—down to Cape Cod, and up to Hanscom Air Force base to food shop. Dad's always thinking about buying food and they come home with twenty brown paper bags and boxes filled with Old World brownies, Zarex syrup, frozen pizzas, baloney, American cheese slices and other empty foods.

Mum goes along silently and obediently with her hollow brown eyes, always itching her yellow skin. I'm embarrassed that my mother is yellow. And that her clothes are hanging on her like she's a stick figure. And that her hair isn't dyed blonde anymore and is growing out like a witch's, all gray and stringy. She goes to the doctors with my father, but we are living like nothing is happening and no one mentions that my mother is yellow. No one comes to tell us that our mother will never get better. That she will only get worse and we are all in the dark about a future that everyone else must know except us.

My brother Joey is seventeen months younger than I and disappearing into drug use. He lives only for The Music. He tells me that at the Boston Common concerts, he jumps onto the stage and offers his help to the roadies, and they let him get right on the stage or next to it, so he can be as close as possible to The Music. The Music is his religion. He wants me to love it as much as he does, and I do love the music, but not like Joey does because I'm too worried all the time about him. He has his Grateful Dead and never-ending supply of pot, hash, and LSD that he believes are saving him. The length of

his light brown hair is the same length as the colored beads hanging around his neck. For his birthday we chip in and buy him a suede fringe jacket, but he sells it. For his next birthday, we chip in and buy him a guitar, but he loses it.

Andrea and Ellen come and go with lost faces. They are only ten months apart and still in high school. Andrea walks around with a sad face, long flaming red hair to her waist, and wears my hand-me-down brown coat. She's the kind of girl who, in October, irons colored maple leaves between sheets of waxed paper to bring to school for decorating her classroom. And Ellen is the kind of sister who makes me breakfast in bed on Saturdays just so I'll get up and do anything with her. She's wild and untamable, a golden light who is funny with loads of friends. Sometimes we sit on the back porch and make ourselves laugh just for fun. We start singing the Mary Poppins song, "I Love to Laugh" with a "Ha-ha, ho-ho, hee-hee," till we're full-blown belly laughing. She has diabetes but we never talk about it.

Thirteen-year-old Terese and I drive over to King's department store in Mum's black car because she has saved up for a hamster, but they tell us that we have to be twenty-one to buy the hamster. You can get drafted to fight in Vietnam, but you can't buy a hamster, so our neighbor, Charlotte, has to return to King's with us to "buy." We set him up in a cage in Terese's room. The hamster becomes her best friend and she teaches him tricks. In her art class at school she makes a little clay statue of him. Her bedroom is already like a laboratory with four bubbling aquariums for breeding tropical fish, that's how smart she is. There are newborn baby swordtails in a separate tank hanging off the side of one of the big ones. Her tiger barbs have eaten the dorsal and pelvic fins off of the Angel fish, and now they look like quarters shakily swimming with their flickering side

fins. Up in her room, I tell her about having periods and make sure that she has the stuff she needs when it comes.

Me. I ride to Canada without a helmet following my instincts to find whatever it is I am looking for. But I have no idea.

Just north of Gloucester is a scenic route through the tiny fancy villages of Essex, Ipswich, and Rowley before we make it to another one called Newburyport. These are the villages of those born with old money and privileged backgrounds. Dad's parents were immigrants from Ireland. His mother was a maid on Fayerweather Street in Cambridge and his Dad was a clerk for the railroad.

Mum's father was a Boston firefighter on Engine 33 across from the Prudential building, while her mother ran a tiny coconut candy factory and mothered nine children. We are not old money from these prim New England towns. My Dad made his living as an insurance broker and Mum as an art teacher. Sure we had a big house, but we had sixteen people living in it for years.

About twenty-six miles north of Gloucester I catch a glimpse of a huge field on the side of the road behind a house. I yell up ahead to Jaycee to stop because I'm thinking that camping on the side of the road could save some money and maybe we could set up right here. She circles back to where I am and waits on her bike while I walk up to the front door and knock.

When a young guy in his late teens answers, I ask if it's okay if we set up our tent in his back yard for the night. He yells back to his parents who come to the door to look us over. We must pass their inspection because they say, "Yes, I guess so. Just go way in the back and you should be okay."

We walk our bikes into the field away from the house and find a nice flat spot for the tent. After we unpack the gear and set up the tent, we get ready to make a little supper, but before we get too far with it, the young guy comes down to us. “My parents would like to invite you up for supper,” he says.

When we get to the house, there are about four young people sitting at the table with the father. They are all very quiet as we join them at the table while the mother bustles around placing bowls of hot food on the table. The kitchen is homey with places set, but casual at the same time.

They are curious about what we are doing, and the father starts asking lots of questions in a kind way. The hot food makes me feel grateful to be sharing it with this family of mostly adolescents. A bit of jealousy twangs in my gut because this home feels carefree, something I haven’t felt for a long time. And there is a smiling mother who is not yellow with clothes hanging from her frame.

After dinner, we head back down to our tent, through the light mist and wet grass. We crawl into the tent and then into our sleeping bags because it’s chilly.

“What a nice family,” I say to Jaycee, hoping to get a little conversation going.

“Yup,” she says, opening her book to start reading.

I wonder if she might start to open up and talk a little more, but it doesn’t appear that way.

It’s still a little light out enough to write a letter home. The rain taps lightly onto the tent as Jaycee reads. In the morning, we’ll continue to head north. I’m optimistic for some sun to dry out our very damp gear.

In the early morning rain, we head out in the brisk dawn. The sky turns from silver to

pink and orange, giving us some hope of sun, but it's only a tease. The rain slows down enough to barely allow the sun a peek through the clouds as we ride on an empty road.

Soon we are in Salisbury and veer off to take the road right through the Salisbury Beach amusement park. It's deserted, but the imaginary screams from the abandoned rides echo in this gray lonely silence. No fun happening here. There's a yellow and gray sky, bits of trash and cans on the road. Everything is chilly and damp as we ride through the quiet of a ghostly amusement park in dampness.

We are picking up the pace. And soon we are in New Hampshire. To our right is Hampton Beach, a place my father often went as a young man to ride in motor boats with his ultra-rich friends from Boston College. College was the ticket out of poverty for the children of immigrants and he longed for that carefree life.

While riding past families pulling coolers out of cars and setting up beach blankets with their small families, I remember Dad brought us to Hampton Beach and Revere Beach where the towels and blankets were set up edge to edge on the sand like a giant patchwork quilt covering every inch of the sand, right up to the water, making it almost impossible to walk to the water's edge without stepping at least a little on the edges of someone's else's blanket or towel. As the tide came in, a wave would roll up and over someone's blanket that was too close to the water, making the people jump up out of a sunbathing catnap and grab their stuff before the ocean took it away. It seemed insane to have this many people on the beach, but it was fun sitting on one patch of a jumbo beach quilt. I wondered what my father was doing today; maybe he was driving up to Hanscom Air Force base to go food shopping again with Mum, something that he loved to do. Mum would be following along wordlessly like an obedient bewildered child, her dress hanging from her yellow skeleton body.

Jaycee rides way up ahead of me. At first I felt like I needed to keep up with her, but after a while I don't bother. I'm on my own really. Occasionally she'll tell me which road we are on, but I don't really care where we are. I ride along just thinking about home, then the wildflowers, then the gravel on the shoulder of the road that unfolds in front of my bicycle.

I am away from the sorrow at home and that's what I need now. That's what matters, although I'm horribly lonely. I wonder why I couldn't have done this with someone I love or even like. I wish I did this with my sister or my younger brother before he cared so much about pot, hashish, and LSD. But I'm not—I am riding north along the coast of New England with someone I don't know at all.

She the kind of person who is blasé about everything, like her world is a piece of paper where she marks a checkmark on this event or that occurrence. Like nothing is an adventure in full throttle.

“Those are strawberry leaves,” she says deadpan pointing to the ground as we dismount from our bikes at a rest stop. It's impressive that she can identify something growing wild on the side of the road. There is nothing in nature that I can identify except a handful of birds, violets and lilies of the valley.

I'd never seen a strawberry plant before and if I did, I had no idea what it was. The city of Newton where I grew up had lots of trees and manicured lawns, but it also had fourteen zip codes and paved sidewalks to protect people from walking on real earth. I didn't have the slightest knowledge of the natural world. Jaycee is teaching me to be in that natural world, although she has no idea she is doing that. It's fascinating to me.

Rolling along, I pass so many creatures on the side of the road. Dead creatures. A majestic queen bee. A cat. A raccoon. A snake. Scads of squirrels and chipmunks. I think

of the cars and trucks that are oblivious to hitting these vulnerable resplendent creatures. These innocent little ones just wanting to cross the road and have no idea what is coming to slam into them and either fling their little bodies to the side of the road or squash them flat before they ever know what's hit them. Sometimes I stop and get off my bike to take a close look at them, like I did for the colossal queen bee and the snake, but most times I ride on by.

The bike riding is easy in the cool air as the sun appears then disappears behind the clouds. Across the road of rocky Rye Beach there are huge mansions lining the road opposite the ocean. We stop to buy ice cream cones at a stand at the beach and sit on a rock by the beach to eat it and rest. Jaycee mutters a little. Finally there is a stretch of sunshine that shows the ocean as deep sapphire blue, so with the rain behind us, we decide to forge ahead even further.

We ride right through New Hampshire, past Portsmouth, and triumphantly ride into the third New England state of the day—Maine. Once crossing the border, Jaycee stops for just a minute to acknowledge this fact to me and I detect a slight smile on her face. For a half mile, she even stays closer to me, but soon enough she is way up ahead again. Sometimes I feel rushed to keep up with her, but then get wrapped up in my own thoughts and don't care. I figure I'll catch up sooner or later.

She rides faster, I think, because she has something to prove about her Raleigh. I don't remember making any statements to Jaycee about bike superiority, but she seems to feel the need to tell me often that hers is just as good as mine, if not better.

“My bike is just as good as yours, you know,” and “This bike might have cost less than yours, but it goes faster.”

I have no need to gloat about a bike that I paid for myself. Too much energy, I think

to myself, making it easier to brush off this unfamiliar attitude. There were other things that I had to worry about.

Once in Maine, we ride through Kittery, York, then Ogunquit, and finally after almost forty miles of riding that day, we enter Wells.

Wells is a congested area of Rte.1 with traffic lights at every quarter mile, motels, quick-stop lunch places, ice cream stands, and plenty of gift shops with whirligigs, novelty sculptures of animals, sandcastles, and lobsters, and a Burger King that vents the smell of meat cooking, making me ravenously hungry. Not far from the smell of broiling meat is a sign pointing to a campground on the ocean side of the road with a long gravel driveway winding to the entrance booth.

It's late in the day so we sneak in without paying because there isn't a person at the booth to collect money. We ride in, grateful that we can save a little money. I need to be very careful of my finances and rationalize that we don't have a car to make any trouble. Most of the campsites have RV's and trailers on them. We head to the back of the grounds to choose a site deep in the trees so no one can see us, then I fantasize about a lovely warm shower to top off this long day.

Our campsite is in a quiet area where we park our bikes. I un-strap the canvas bags from my bike rack and pull out the tent to set it up before it gets too dark. By now it's easy to put it up quickly. I toss all my stuff into the tent and mention to Jaycee that I am going to go for a ride to find some food that doesn't have to be cooked at the campsite. I am just too tired. Up to now she has done everything on her own anyway, so I don't even bother to ask about what she will be doing. Besides, she has commented once before that

she never puts fast food into her body. I need meat now and the food has to be cheap. Cooking noodle soup again will not be enough for me.

We have been riding separately for about forty miles without talking at all, except for eating those ice creams back in New Hampshire. I am not only hungry, but I am also depressed. There has been a light drizzle off and on since we cycled into Maine with a fog that has dredged up loneliness. Riding with someone who doesn't talk to me or even acknowledge me has me feeling like an outcast. I'm already believing that I'm a spec in the universe, and this girl is unknowingly reinforcing that with her slighting of me. So, I go off alone to get some junk food while she stays in the tent.

I ride down the road slowly over the gravel driveway far away from everything I know as familiar. I want to be away on one hand, but I'm overwhelmed by the isolation. I want to be far from the sorrow at home, but I'm still sad and hollow here. With the fog, the whole world is black, white, and gray.

Burger King is already floating its smells of meat my way. It's felt good to be pumping my legs up hills and rolling down hills and doing something hard that creates this much hunger, but just like a flag flying behind my bike, the sadness is following me, tracking me down. I had thought that I could ride away from it, but here it is with me still, while riding slowly along the side of Route 1 to Burger King.

Cars are passing and slowing down now as they pull into the parking lot. They're full of families and friends, laughing and talking with familiarity. These bands of people make me miss my tribe. I'm not used to being separate from them.

Just before reaching the Burger King driveway, I get off my bike to guide the wheels through the soft shoulder surface, and notice something on the side of the road in the sand

and gravel. I carefully lay my bike on its side.

There in front of me is a perfect red-winged blackbird with eyes closed and wings all shiny and solid black—so black that it's almost blue with a line of crimson red feathers and shocking bright yellow ones along the glossy wing. It's flawless in its beauty. It's one more being I've seen dead on the road since I left my father in the rain in Massachusetts.

I stoop down and while reaching to pick it up, I drop hard on my knees in a massive sob, right on the shoulder of Route 1. I lift up the bird, hold it in my hands and cry and cry and cry.

The bird is the purest innocent creature dead on the side of the road not even noticed by all the cars and trucks roaring by. No one is even aware of it, except me. I hold onto it and sob right on the sand shoulder.

A carful of people slows down when they see me.

I can't leave the red-winged blackbird there on the un-holy dirt shoulder, so I get up and heave it as far as I can, back into the marsh beyond the road's edge where it will rest in peace by the dry cat tails from last year that still stand tall.

Mum is leaving us, she is leaving.

Another huge boat of a car pulls into the driveway of the Burger King, filled with a father, a mother, and a pack of laughing kids.

I get up and make my way into Burger King. The air is thick. I'm underwater walking in slow motion to buy a warm cheeseburger.

After another rainy night in the tent, we pack up our wet stuff and head north. The tent is starting to smell of mold. Everything is damp. Shoes, clothes, bike seat. Even though it

would be faster to ride on the bigger roads to get to some shelter, the roads we choose to ride on are the less-travelled ones near the coast.

I'm wet and cold, but alive and riding my bike to Canada with the soothing rain all over me. I am part of the rain with my hair all wet and smeared against the sides of my face. I don't need to escape this. I decide to accept it and surrender to it; besides I don't have the energy to fight it. It is freeing and washing me clean.

I wonder what Mum is doing right now as I ride along this Maine Coast. Has she ever felt the freedom I feel now? She's 56 years old and has been dealt a hand that would be harsh and painful for anyone, let alone a sensitive artistic one. She birthed seven babies within nine years and watched four siblings die in a very short time with no time to grieve.

Shy and lovely, she grew up in a close but poor Catholic community in the city of Somerville, long before it was a fancy place to live. She worked in the library, a perfect place for a tender soul. Between her siblings dying, getting so sick, and coping with seven adolescents, she wanted to be as far away from us as she could. She was exhausted. I admired her from afar and was proud that she was an artist, but to me she was a hologram that I never got to touch and we never got to know each other.

On either side of the road are fields of pink and purple spiked wildflowers in patches as big as an entire backyard and their colors are bright even in the rain. How could these be so beautiful and wild? The world is beautiful I am finding out, even in the rain and mist. My heart is full with these flowers that I've never seen before.

I am glad now that I am alone most of the time on this trip. I am able to think and feel as my bicycle carries me along with everything I need to live. My legs are powering me all these miles. When the hills are excruciatingly hard, I count my way up with each

push of the pedal. One, two, three. Two, two, three. Three, two, three. Four, two, three. And then I'm up the hill. Only one time I dismounted on a steep hill and it was so hard to get back to pedaling, that I decide that I'll power through no matter what, and never get off again when the pedaling gets hard and I keep that promise to myself.

An iron bridge links us to the city of Portland where we wonder if we should spring for a cheap hotel to dry out. Ken, the guy back at the Gloucester campground who was getting a divorce, is riding across at the same time. We stop on the bridge to exchange hellos and he tells us that he knows of a hotel, so we go, too.

The Sea Princess Hotel is on a dirty side street and shockingly cheap. We get a room with two beds and as soon as I pull back the sheets to flop onto it, I realized that I'm not the first one whose been in it. It's full of little crumbs and black sand, like whoever was in it had their shoes on. So I wander down to the front desk to tell them. This is no fancy place and I start to wonder if these rooms are rented by the hour. Maybe it's for the guys who come in from fishing with a lady friend. It's a worn out, well-used place where tired people come for the night, stained carpets, sandy beds and all.

I tell the skinny man at the desk who looks a little like Lurch in *The Munsters*, "Hey, the beds have dirt and sand in them."

"I'll send someone up," he says.

A sad lady in old clothes shuffles into the room and says she's here to brush off the bed. I'm too tired to argue. She brushes off the sandy sheets with her hand, I take a shower, and get into the bed, whipped.

The next morning, we head out again in dry clothes. Although there's no rain at the moment, there's a thick fog as we head out onto Rte. 1 north towards Freeport, a mere

twenty miles away. We part ways with Ken and watch him ride north. Silently I wish him luck about the divorce.

L.L.Bean is right on Rte.1 and it seems crazy to pass up the chance to go in. Years before we had stopped there with Dad so he could buy himself a Viyella shirt. Viyella shirts were these pricey plaid shirts from England made of a fancy soft flannel that my father thought he better get for himself. It was his dream to own one. They are twice as expensive as a regular shirt. I couldn't see any difference. But apparently Dad did.

L.L.Bean is famous for its good quality camping gear. There is so much functional stuff in that place that I could use on this trip but is totally out of my grasp to buy. I have no extra money and am doing this trip on a shoestring as it is. But there is something there that I knew I should buy to remember this trip. It cost \$1.95 and is the best deal I've ever gotten, and possibly my most prized possession. It's a knife in its own a leather sheath. It's about 8 inches long, and perfect for camping. I imagine that King Arthur had one. As the clerk hands it to me, I can feel the power it gives me immediately. It isn't the knife itself that holds the power, it's me that has the power and holding that knife pulls it right out of me.

In 1972, L.L.Bean was a small building across the street from a gas station. I need to check the air in my tires because I don't want to get another flat, so at the end of every day, I check them. The gas station has a tire pressure gauge right here, so I can do it before we stop for the night. While I'm doing this, a good-looking guy in his early twenties comes up to me when he sees my bike with all the gear strapped to it.

“Where you headed?” he asks.

“Canada,” I answer.

“Taking the ferry over?”

“Hadn’t thought of that. Where’s that?”

“Bar Harbor. It goes right to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. That’s where I’m from.”

“We are headed to Canada but weren’t sure how to go yet. A ferry sounds good.”

“Go stay with my parents in Kentville. They’ll put you up.”

We chat for only a few minutes. He writes the name and address of his parents on a slip of paper and hands it to me with a wish of luck.

Why not? I think to myself. Jaycee overheard what transpired and is in agreement. We decide to take the ferry from Bar Harbor to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. So we power on, not sure of our next campsite.

We’ve ridden just a little under twenty miles this day because of our stop in L.L.Bean. So, after lunch breaks, small towns and still spitting rain, we make a mutual decision to find another field and rest for the night. We again buy our food for camp cooking at a small market, and by now, it seems never enough food. Lipton noodle soup is not enough to sustain me. I need bread, meat, and bigger noodles.

I’ve never been a big eater and have always been quite thin, but this is different. I need more. My body is craving food like I’ve never felt before. We start to buy things that we can split, like bread and a pack of ham, a bigger block of cheese. And we are even talking more. Jaycee actually smiles here and there. She is still stand-offish, and I still don’t get a warm feeling from her, but at least I am visible to her. She notices me.

I need to call home to check in, so I get a pocketful of change for a pay phone and find a phone at a gas station. Dad is the one who answers and asks how it’s going. I speak quickly so my money won’t run out. He says that Mum is the same and can’t come to the

phone. I ask about the younger kids and tell him where we are, and that so far all is well, despite the rain, and that I'll continue sending letters and post cards to them.

I tell him that I love them and hang up wishing desperately that my family wasn't going through this and that they could see what I was seeing along the road.

We veer off the road to one of the plentiful fields and set up another wild campsite for the night, and when morning comes, we start up all over again.

The next day, after riding thirty-five miles or so, the late afternoon comes and again it's time to find a resting place. The roads are still lined with purple and pink elongated flowers. Sometimes there are mobs of them together and sometimes small crowds of them.

Whatever they are, they are stunning and in the constant mist, their color against the gray is heartbreakingly beautiful. I decide that I must find out what these flowers are that welcome us to this part of Maine. There are times when nature is so beautiful and fleeting I want to turn away from it, hardly believing that it can be real. In the fall when the colors are bright and luscious, I am so humbled by the beauty of the changing leaves that I turn away.

We stop at a market for food and decide we need to find a place to camp right away. We are near Damariscotta where there are little dirt roads off Rte. 1. After a few minutes back on the road Jaycee points to the right and I follow her down the road. We ride way down where there is no one and nothing around but some railroad tracks.

The sun has come out and is setting in a sky of peach blush in and out of the gray clouds, as we pitch the tent near the tracks. It feels good to be this tired. It feels good to feel something other than deep gloom, although that is still ever present. It's been deep in

my being, my every cell. To feel this tired and hungry is waking up my tired sad psyche, even though Jaycee still says little to me.

Again, I set up the tent alone while she starts to cook her food on my one-dollar stove as if I'm not there. It's odd to be with this solitary person who hardly talks. After the tent is up, she goes about arranging her sleeping bag inside of it, again as if I'm not there. She eats her food in silence or one-word answers. At night she rolls over without saying goodnight to me, another thing I have never experienced before. Before long we've fallen asleep in the calm of this peaceful grassy field.

But in the black of night we are jolted awake by a deafening blast from a horn. The tent becomes a glowing bright yellow-orange and it's blowing and blowing and blowing till it's almost flat. Unnerved and startled, we crawl out of the crumpled mess of orange nylon, unzipping it and shaking to see a locomotive barreling about 10 feet away from our tent. There must have been 100 cars on it, it took so long to go by.

What were we thinking to pitch a tent ten feet from railroad tracks? The rain starts to come down harder outside. We move the tent a little further from the tracks and after a long while I fall back into an unsettled asleep. In the early morning the dew is heavy on everything. The wet tent is barely tied onto the back of my bike with bungee cords when Jaycee silently mounts her bike and heads off through the stomped down pathway in wet grass towards the main road. All I know is that we take a right onto the road because that's north.

We ride through Damariscotta, then Nobleboro, until we are at the top of a massive hill in Waldoboro that scoops down and then back up again. We pause at the top and can see up

ahead that it must be one mile down, then another mile back up. We'll be wheeling at high speed along cracked and sandy pavement, but there's no choice but to go.

I fly down full speed and reach halfway up the steep part, but I don't dismount because I promised myself that I wouldn't. I stand on the peddles with my legs aching, and push and push and push, standing on each push. It's hard with bags buckled to both sides of the bike and a wet tent and sleeping bag strapped on the rack, but I keep going. Counting the force of each pedal helps. ONE, two, three, four. TWO, two, three, four. THREE, two, three, four.

At the top of what feels like a mountain now is Moody's Diner where Jaycee has pulled over and dismounted. She's plopped herself on the grass, so I pull over, too, lay my bike on the ground and collapse next to it to swig water from my bottle with quivery hands. Jaycee is watching the cars at the traffic light in silence. I wish I had money to eat in the diner, but I can't spend it on that kind of frill when I have bread, cheese, and a slim Jim in my pack. I only go in to use the bathroom and to ask how far it is to get to Rockland, the next destination. It's about 16 miles away, the cashier tells me.

Then it's back on the bike on narrow Rte. 1, riding past farms, houses and fields, and past more and more of those purple and pink spiked wildflowers. We glide through a town called Thomaston, along a tree-lined main street, where the trees seem to be bowing to me as I ride through like a queen. It's been a week now of riding my bicycle up the coast from just north of Boston. If I stopped right this minute, I'd still be proud of myself with a new-found self-respect that I've never felt before. I've ridden all on my own power all this way, by my own body. I have no motor and little money. The wind is blowing off any self-doubt as my long hair blows behind me. While growing up in a suburb of Boston, a third child in a family of seven kids, I was a nobody. But I've ridden

my bike 180 miles and slept on the side of the road each night. Not too shabby, I think to myself.

Further along and almost into Rockland, Jaycee rolls into an ice cream stand, and I follow. After I get off the bike and lean it against a tree, my legs wobble to the window. There are only three flavors offered but the cones are only ten cents, which seems too good to be true, but that's what it costs for a small chocolate. Some little kids stare at us in curiosity as we lick our cones, then climb back onto our bikes. The curiosity of two girls riding bicycles loaded down with canvas bags and bundles in 1972 is never-ending.

When we reach the town of Rockland, we cycle down the main street past Newbury's, a hardware store, and a small-town grocery store and follow signs pointing to a ferry terminal for the islands.

Jaycee had read in the *North American Bicycle Atlas* that we could take a ferry over to North Haven island, and then to Stonington to ride to Bar Harbor faster by a more scenic route, so that's where we head.

At the ticket booth, we buy one-way tickets for the last ferry of the afternoon, then roll our bikes onto a ramp leading to the lower level where about ten cars are parked. We make our way upstairs and outside to lean on the railing and watch as the ferry blasts its departure whistle and the scenery starts to move. The ocean churns a wake of foam beside and behind the boat as we glide away from the Rockland dock towards North Haven Island. There must be a store on the island to buy some food when we get there, I say out loud to Jaycee. "Probably," she says.

While watching the ocean boil a frothy white veil alongside the ferry, I think of the last time I was on a ferry in Maine. My father had wanted to visit a house he once

owned on an island in Casco Bay, so he brought us all up to see it again and go to the beach. My mother had a red-lipstick smile and a block-printed aqua scarf that she had made and tied around her head to wear on windy days like a Madonna of the Wind. She sat at the back of the ferry on a wooden slatted bench with a small child on her lap and the rest of us around her. She's happy with her family on the ferry. She's happy before the strange time when a cluster of deaths happened and scooped her heart out.

My father had bought the house for almost nothing in hopes that we could summer there, but it was too far north for my mother who was in the middle of being pregnant for nine years. My father would bring her to the island to stay with the little ones, while he worked in Boston during the week. She explained,

“I was all alone with three little kids and pregnant with a fourth until Dad came up on the weekend. I was lonely. When I tried to make some friends there, one lady told me that I'd never be accepted on the island, being Catholic and all.”

So they sold the house, keeping some of the furniture and the model ships that were left from the previous owners. My mother's red lipstick smile and scarf are my only mementos of that day on a Maine ferry.

Our ferry docks on North Haven, but there isn't much here, just trees and a tiny little shack by a narrow dirt road. All the cars know where they are going when they drive off the ferry. A man in a uniform comes up to us as we wheel our bikes along.

“Where are you staying? he asks.

“We're camping.”

“Oh, no you're not. There's no camping on this island.”

“Wasn’t that the last boat? We don’t mind just setting up our tent somewhere.” I say.

“Yep, it was the last boat, so I don’t know what you’re going to do now. There’s no camping here. Nowhere. That’s the law.”

“Well, what do you expect us to do? We didn’t know that.”

“I don’t know. You can’t camp,” he says in a flat cold voice. “And there’s no hotel.”

In the tiny shack is another man who overhears this and yells, “I know a place you can stay. I’ll call for you.”

Turns out we didn’t do our homework about this island at all. Not only is there no campground, but there are no stores or inns. Only the people who own homes live here.

We wait by the shack and in minutes the problem is solved, although dollar signs splash around in my mind, making me worry how much this will cost. The man gives us directions to a house and we ride there in ten minutes.

When we get there, a chubby man with slippers and a cane comes out of a fenced-in area where about five peacocks wander. More than one has full feathers blooming open when we show up. I’ve never imagined such a bird near me, because I’ve only seen peacock feathers for sale in Harvard Square in the little boutique shops that are fun to poke around in. I never saw the feathers on an actual peacock.

This was a family of six kids, all still living at home. He tells us we can stay there for \$20 a night for the two of us. Seems reasonable and he shows us to a neat room with twin beds all made up for guests. His kids range in age from five or six on up to high

school age. The man tells us that we could eat dinner with them for an extra \$5 each if we want, which we do.

While waiting for dinner he offers to give us a tour of the island in his car. Out in the driveway, we are about to get into his station wagon when he tells us, “You have to sit in the back there. I promised Ben that he could sit in the front with me.”

His son Ben was about seven or eight years old. That would never happen with my father. He would have immediately forgotten a promise to a paltry kid, and had the adult sit up front, relegating the peon child to invisibility and second class in the presence of an adult. But this man holds his promise to his son. My Dad changed his mind frequently and he transformed into another man after he pulled his Dewar’s out of the closet above where the trash was kept.

So, as we drive the long empty country roads of the island, the father points out homes of this wealthy politician or that movie star. He explains that these homes are referred to as “cottages,” although they are really mansions with fifteen or twenty rooms in them, making me wonder why anyone needs a home that big that they only visit a few weeks a year.

Back at the house we eat a nice dinner made from one of his chickens. His wife silently wanders around the house as he lords over us. The rest of the family eats in another room away from us.

“We need to get over to the mainland from here. To Stonington. Do you know what the best way would be for us to get there?” I ask the father.

He tells us that he can arrange for us to get on a lobster boat for a fee. He knows someone. He makes a call and it's settled that if we pay \$25, a lobsterman will take us over there in the morning.

"It's good to sleep in a bed tonight instead of the floor of the wet tent," I comment.

"Yep, I bet," he says. "Sleep well."

He shows us where the bathroom is for a shower and we drag our canvas bags into the bedroom. I'm bone-tired, but I want to write a letter to Mum. It feels like this isn't real and I want to make sure I write everything down, so I don't forget.

Dear Mum,

You won't believe it. We are getting a ride on a lobster boat in the morning. When's the last time that ever happened? I can hardly believe this. I hope that it's not too hot there for you. I think about you all the time and wish that you could see these wildflowers all along the roads. I found out today that they are called Lupines. I bet that you could make a beautiful painting of them. There is a peacock here that fluffs itself up when I go near it. Who would have guessed that peacocks live here in Maine? I'll try to get a feather for you and will write again soon.

Love, Martha

But my mother hasn't made a painting in years. She stopped making art altogether when her family started to die. And she's one of those who can really draw anything—people, trees, houses. When she used to take all seven of us to the museums of Boston and Cambridge when they were free, she'd show us the glass flowers at the Harvard Museum of Natural History and the gardens that flowered in the middle of winter at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Long flowering vines hang from the balconies with the air

inside smelling just like Spring while dirty snow covered the pathways of the Fens in Boston's Back Bay.

Once when I was in high school and hoping to go to Mass Art, Mum brought me with her to the DeCordova Museum to a life drawing class with no idea that there would be a nude model. "Oh my," she had said when we arrived. It was my first time drawing from life and I am so glad that I was with my mother for it, one of the only times I had ever been alone with her.

Last year while I was changing her bandages after her surgery, she said as she looked far away, "You never get over your first death. You never get over it."

"Humph," I said with no idea why she said this, although I knew that her first sister Sara had died only months after I was born. Sara was the sister who had been a reader for her thesis when she was finishing graduate school for Art Education—the thesis that she finished but never passed in because she was mourning the death of her father.

Then Sara died. Then her mother. Then Evelyn. Then Robert. Then Adele. Most of them died of cancer within a handful of years.

"My father died while I was at school teaching," she said. "As I walked down the hall to go home, a teacher called out to me,

'What's the matter with you? You look like someone just dropped dead.' Oh, he apologized to me at the funeral. But wasn't that strange?"

She said this looking far away as she lay in bed. The incision on her abdomen looked like a shovel had scooped out the flesh and just left it open. That's where I poured in the peroxide and let it bubble up, then stuffed it with gauze. I tried not to gag whenever I did this. Eventually it closed up, which got me off the hook on that job.

Before we get on the lobster boat tomorrow, I decide I will mail this to Mum so it has a postmark from this island. It might cheer her up. Jaycee gets in bed and turns out the light while I'm still writing my letter, but I don't say anything and turn on my flashlight to finish. She rolls over without saying one word.

The next morning, the light is bright and the air is clear. I've packed my stuff and loaded up my bike outside in the yard.

"I'll show you how to ride over to the harbor to catch that boat," the father tells us after we eat and pack up our stuff from the bedroom. I follow him outside where there's a full-blown up peacock strutting by the back door in the sun, but I don't get a feather for Mum.

Out on the driveway, the man gives us directions to get to the little harbor of North Haven island. The island is peaceful with all trees and quiet country roads. When we roll down a hill to the harbor, there are a few lobster boats floating this way and that way out on the water at moorings. But right at the dock is a boat with the motor running and a man in a plaid shirt waiting near it. He waves and we ride over to him.

He's expecting us and helps us lift our bikes onto the boat. He has an errand to do, a boat part to pick up in Stonington. We hand him the \$25 and hoist each bike into the open part of the boat behind the steering wheel and I am in awe that this is happening. When you come from the suburbs of Boston, you only know cement sidewalks, mailboxes on every corner and green manicured lawns like golf courses.

This is a real working lobster boat far from the limbo of the suburbs. Dad was a first-generation son of Irish immigrants who'd tell us, "I wanted to associate with rich

kids. I wanted to be a rich kid, so I hung around with them and went up to Hampton Beach to ride in their motor boats and chase girls.”

His dreams that were interrupted by loads of kids.

Where was my father anyway? Or my mother? I have no memory of them eating at the kitchen table with us. Where were our parents? On Sundays we ate together in the dining room, but every other night we ate our frozen peas and fish sticks with *F Troop*, *Gilligan's Island* and *Leave it to Beaver*.

The ocean is deep frothy green, rolling and swelling under and around the lobster boat. The man in the plaid shirt doesn't turn around. He stands at the steering wheel looking straight ahead. Jaycee looks straight ahead, too, looking bored. We ride past a few small islands then he picks up speed. The wind blows my long hair behind me.

There is a whole world ahead, I think to myself, licking my lips.

We arrive at Stonington which is on the tip of Deer Isle. The man in the plaid shirt docks the boat and we hoist the bikes up and over the side of his boat and onto the dock.

“Good luck,” he calls to us.

The day is finally sunny after two weeks of riding in the mist and rain. We head along the road towards Bar Harbor but will need to stay on the side of the road one more night before we get there.

Next, we ride to Bar Harbor where we board the ferry to Yarmouth Nova Scotia. After four weeks of circling around the southern half of Nova Scotia on our ten-speed bicycles, I call my father to tell him that we will board the ferry to Portland Maine. He says, “Martha, you need to come home. I will pick you up at the ferry terminal in Portland.” I am annoyed that he is barging into my bicycle trip. He says very little

about why he will be there waiting for us and I'm a little embarrassed to tell this to Jaycee. She rolls her eyes like I'm an overprotected child of my fathers. She's not required to take the offer of a ride from my father, but she doesn't want to ride back to Boston alone without me, her security net.

In the fifth week, when I make my usual phone call home, I tell Dad that we were back in Yarmouth after riding a giant loop around the lower half of Nova Scotia. We had started in Yarmouth and we ended there. We'll be taking the nine-hour ferry ride to Portland, Maine and start riding back to Massachusetts from there. I am tired. I had been thin in the first place, but with so much riding, I've gotten even thinner and have little energy left.

"I'm going to pick you up in Portland, Martha. It's time for you to come home," my father says.

He is infringing on my success. He did this at the beginning of our trip in Massachusetts and he is doing this again. He has some nerve telling me what to do when I am twenty years old.

"Please, Dad! You don't need to do that," I say. "I want to ride back to Massachusetts on my own!"

"I'll be at the ferry, Martha. It's time to come home."

I'm embarrassed that my father is doing this. This is infringing on Jaycee's trip, too, although she's under no obligation to take the ride from my father. But she agrees to it. I feel like a baby with Dad doing this. I've always kept him at a distance because I never wanted him to tell me what to do. I'd paid for college myself until dropping out after the second year from being so fucked up and depressed.

Along the way we have met a guy named Glen from Hoboken NJ, an eccentric guy with a lisp who is outspoken. After placing his order for five bottles of duty-free booze on the ferry, he screams at the end of his order, “and a straw!”

He asks if he can hitch a ride with us back to Boston and stay at our house before he gets on a bus back to New Jersey. I say sure, not thinking one bit how three bicycles and four adults will fit into my father’s station wagon. Glen is pretty savvy with bikes and says that he can take all of the wheels off our bikes to fit them into the back of the car. But I am also not thinking about the poor timing of inviting two people to our house.

It’s about nine o’clock at night when the ferry docks in Portland Harbor. Dad is waiting. He’s driven two hours north of our house on the Boston line to come get me. Once again, he looks just as sad and helpless as he looked five weeks before when he left us on the side of the road a little north of Boston. With seven kids and the oldest a juvenile delinquent that he worries about all the time, he has never before been interested in what I was doing.

I can see him from the deck of the ship as it’s unloading cars and passengers. He stands in the dark alone. This father of mine is evolving into a humbler man during the illness of my mother this past year. The person who I had always thought was mean to my brothers and inconsiderate to my mother, now seems about as loyal and responsible a man as could be because there he was at the ferry in the dark, watching as we wheeled our bikes down the ramp of the enormous Nova Scotia ferry, knowing something that I don’t know yet. Silently forcing me to begin the process of facing what is coming at home.

I hug him, but I am embarrassed that he showed up, too. I want to be independent of him and he is interfering with the climax of this five-week odyssey.

As Glen and JC are gathering their things to get in the car, he says on the side to me, “You know, Martha, it’s not really the right time to have people staying at the house.”

“It’ll only be a night or two, Dad. It’s okay and I’ll figure out where they’ll sleep,” I say.

My father’s face is long and empty. I need everything to be normal. Other people have normal lives. I want to pretend that everything is fine at our house, too.

I sit up front with my father who isn’t too talkative as we drive home in the dark, but he tries to be interested and excited about what I am telling him. I had done it. I had ridden for a few hundred miles on my own power through rain and exhaustion, the flu, and loneliness. With very little money, too. I carried all of my own food and snuck into campgrounds without paying. Other than food, a few bike repairs, admission to a museum or two, and the ferries, the trip was cheap. If I could do that, I could do anything I set my mind to do.

When we arrive home, Mum doesn’t look that much worse than when I left. She was already so yellow and thin with leathery skin, that it wasn’t really possible for her to look much worse. I hug her when I see her, and her hollow eyes look almost through me. But she is there, and I can’t process consciously what is happening. I don’t want to. I am annoyed that she is in this condition. I am embarrassed to introduce her to Glenn.

Both JC and Glenn stay overnight at our house. I just assumed it was perfectly okay for them to do so. Why should my life be any different? Why shouldn’t I have people stay over? Why didn’t I understand this precarious situation at our house?

Because no one told me that my mother was dying. We had been on our own taking care of her. There was no such thing as hospice, at least we'd never heard of it. Sure, I knew that she had cancer. But no one talked about it. No one said anything about that fact staring at every one of us. Mum's days were limited. My two older siblings had left home and I was the oldest who shouldn't have left at all.

The next day, Glenn took a bus back to Hoboken. I drove him to a bus station where I helped him to load his bike underneath in the cargo space of the bus. JC's boyfriend, Paul drove to our house from western Massachusetts to pick her up. She said a quick goodbye and they were off.

I was seriously depressed most of the trip, so I can't blame JC too much for her aloofness. She, also, was twenty years old, and how was she supposed to know how to handle a seriously depressed girl whose mother was dying. I was almost mute most of the trip, following her wherever she wanted to go. I must have been horrible company, like an albatross to drag around. No wonder she hardly talked to me. I was too fucked up to be good company, so lost and alone.

Less than two weeks later, I'm with Mum in a police station wagon with the siren blaring all the way up Commonwealth Avenue past Uncle Frank's street to St. Elizabeth's Hospital. After a couple of days there, she's brought back home and set up in a hospital bed in our den, the same room where we watched the *Ed Sullivan Show* and screamed our brains out at the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.

And about ten days after that, Mum lay blind and golden as Andrea, Ellen, Terese, and I camped on the floor in the living room. Mum had said once that when her sister

Sara was dying of cancer just months after I was born, she told her it was okay to let go. And she died.

So I said to Mum, “It’s okay, Mum. You can let go.” That night, as we all sat around the hospital bed, Mum’s eyes opened wide because she saw something out the window across from the foot of her bed. The window was black, and I couldn’t see anything.

Dad held her up and said, “Say goodbye to your mother, kids.” After we each took a turn kissing her cheek and saying goodbye, Dad let her back down onto the sheets. What I imagined she saw through the black window was a chariot.

Part Four

Twenty-Six Years Later

It's late at night and I roll over to fall asleep next to my husband. Out of nowhere a wave of panic strikes me hard enough to shake away sleep. I've often had premonitions and good perceptions of people and things, but in a practical world, I've learned by the reactions of others to dismiss them as silly.

This one is different. It's a massive panic.

"I better write this date and time down," I think to myself.

But instead, I lie awake for a long time worried and wondering. I am positive that a little something has happened in my body. An infinitesimal something. A tiny "blip." After a long time, and without saying anything to my husband, I go to sleep. It's late summer and I'm forty-five years old.

June. School got out a week ago and I'm rushing to get our oldest ready for his first Boy Scout camp experience. The troop meets in the supermarket parking lot in a half hour. Our oldest is eleven years old. Our other two sons are seven and nine.

I feel as though I'm walking through thick mud or deep water. Yesterday there was a pogo stick in the yard in front of the car and it seemed like a massive effort to bend over and pick it up. I wake up with dread every morning.

Getting my boy scout's stuff packed has taken just about everything out of me. I am glad there is a list to follow.

As I pass the full-length mirror in our bedroom, I take a glance at myself. It's a side-view of me in a rose-colored top with a denim wrap-around skirt.

"My God. I look 8 months pregnant," I think. I'm 46.

A few weeks before, while chatting with my next-door neighbors, the mothers of two little kids, I tell Judith,

“Hey, I have been farting for weeks now and it’s not letting up. Know of any remedies?”

“Must be intense, neigh-ba, but I have something. Simethicone. I’ll bring it over,” she says.

I’m grateful and it works a little, but it doesn’t entirely stop the problem. Would I tell a male doctor this?

No. And I didn’t. Most women would not see a doctor because they are farting too much.

Months later in February, we are at Sunday River in Maine to ski as a family, one of the few times we’ve gone off to do this for a whole day. At lunch time, back in the lodge I go into the ladies’ room. After relieving myself I glance into the toilet where there is a bright red bloom of blood, the size of a rose. It shouldn’t be there at this time of the month. Not now.

“I could set a clock with the way my periods happen,” I’ve bragged to my sisters and friends. Some people have them come irregularly, but not mine. They have always come exactly when my calendar says they should come. Twenty-eight days apart, right along with the moon’s phases.

I leave the rest room and go to my husband. He is standing at a table near the kids who are eating lunch and chatting at a long cafeteria table.

“What’s wrong?” he says as he sees my face.

“I don’t know,” I say, “but something is off with me. I shouldn’t be bleeding now. My period isn’t due for another few weeks.”

He shrugs and gives me a quick hug. “Don’t worry,” he tells me. But I do. I go back onto the mountain to ski again with them, but my heart knows that something is not right.

I was finished having babies when our third child was five years old. I would have loved to have had one more to make it four children, but Reade was working too much and was never home. Three boys were already a handful and if I dared to have one more without his help, I’d have had a nervous breakdown.

So I scheduled a tubal ligation. The tying off of the fallopian tubes. The end of an era for me. I’d have to be content with our family of five.

I call for an appointment with the doc that Reade and I both use for a general practitioner, expecting to be given a referral to a gynecologist about having a tubal ligation, but instead I am told by the doctor,

“No. I handle the preparation for tubal ligation right here in this office. First, I’ll get a Pap smear from you and then you’ll go to the hospital for an EKG. Then the following week you’ll have the procedure. I do the Pap smears right here in this office.”

A routine Pap smear is recommended for all women as a screen for cervical cancer. Most of us are used to having them. A swab is taken from our cervixes every three years and they usually come back okay. The cervix is the narrow end of the uterus at the top of the vagina. The test can detect early cervical cancer.

It crossed my mind that I would have preferred this to be handled by a GYN specialist. That thought intensified as I lay on the examining table with my legs spread-

eagle in stirrups, noticing that he had an instruction manual propped up next to him on a table for reference. He awkwardly picked up the ice-cold speculum to stick into my delicate vagina, but first I mentioned,

“You’re going to warm that thing up first, aren’t you?”

Someone had stuck a cold speculum into my vagina once before. When I was eighteen and my mother was first diagnosed with cancer at the military hospital in Boston, my sister and I thought that we should have a physical exam because we had never had one before. It would be free, now that my father was retired from the naval reserves and we could get health care at the military hospital. Until then we had never been to a doctor for a physical exam, only for mandatory inoculations. A doctor agreed to do an exam, but he, too, read from a manual as he did the Pap smear. That time, he stuck the ice-cold speculum inside of me and with the memory of that still fresh in my mind, I was determined that was not going to happen again.

“Oh, sure,” the doctor answered and stood up to run it under warm water at his sink.

The result of the Pap smear came back abnormal a week later. The doctor told me that they often come back abnormal, and he would do it again. I asked again if I could get a referral to a gynecologist for the next time and again he said, “No. I do it all here.”

There was another Pap smear with him. Again, it was abnormal. Again, I asked for a referral, but still he wouldn’t refer me to a GYN.

“What’s the sense of having the test if the result isn’t taken seriously?” I ask him.

“Maybe you were out of sorts. Let’s wait a few months and do it again,” he tells me.

I had already gone to the hospital for the EKG test that makes sure my heart will be healthy for the tubal ligation procedure. I enter the office for registration and recognize the nurse as someone from church. My Catholic church, where Catholic women were not supposed to use any form of birth control, especially tubal ligation. Only the “rhythm method” is officially accepted, which means that a woman keeps track of her menstrual cycles and ovulation days by taking her temperature every morning. No condoms, pills, diaphragms or IUD’s allowed by the male religious leaders of the Catholic church who claim, “never to have sex of any kind”. Right.

But still, we women go up to receive communion while using birth control. We still decorate the altars with flowers and teach religious education classes, we wash the priest’s vestments and altar cloths, we repair the zippers and holes in their clothes, and cook dinners for them. We take care of all things church related because the men don’t often step up to do those menial tasks. We do these things because we love the Mass, even though we are told how to handle our bodies by a church that reveres the Blessed Mother yet treats its female congregation as second class. We “bob our heads and say our rosaries” when we are told how to handle our bodies by the priests who are supposed to keep their hands to themselves, but sometimes don’t.

I, too, helped with all of those things at church, all the while using birth control and with no apologies. I love the mysticism of the Catholic church, but the rules about birth control I have no use for whatsoever and have no qualms about the decisions I’ve made about my body.

The nurse and I recognize each other from church. We are both there every Sunday with our children.

“I’m a little embarrassed coming in here to tell you what I’m planning to do, seeing as how we see each other in church,” I say. “I’m here for a tubal ligation.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” she tells me, “I already had mine.” And we laugh.

“The men who make the rules about birth control don’t know what they are mandating,” I say as she pulls out the forms for me to sign.

I’ve always believed that I can still pray in my church and love God without following rules. I love to receive communion. I love the sacraments. I love the Mass. I love the teachings of social justice which is a basic tenet of Catholicism. My God knows me well, and the topic of birth control is between God and me.

Three months after that, I see the blood blooming in the toilet. The blood that is not supposed to show up for weeks because my periods are so on time and regular that I could set a clock by them. This blood sets off the alarms, the fog horns, the sirens, the warning bells, and the danger signals. Surely, I will get a referral now to get to a gynecologist’s office. Our insurance won’t let me call a specialist for an appointment without our general practitioner giving his permission first. He holds the key and I am under his thumb. Under the thumb of a man who hasn’t been listening to what I’m telling him.

His office is five minutes from our house. I park my car and head to the front door of the building with a cold deep fear in my step. The bleeding was all it took for me to really

pay attention to something happening in my body. Already I'd had some annoying changes, but it was easy to dismiss them while trying to mobilize and coordinate three boys who are close in age- 7, 9, & 11. I'd had them within four years of each other, so I was already frenzied with the constant activity and I easily dismissed my own needs. Mothers do this all the time. We take care of everyone else's needs but our own.

I was dismissing the more frequent than usual visits to the bathroom and irritated with myself about it. I had gas constantly, also annoying and embarrassing. My waistbands were tighter all the time, making me think I should stop eating the leftovers from the kid's plates. And during intercourse there was pain, which I attributed to the rearrangement of my insides after giving birth to the three babies. All of these things are easily dismissed by any busy mother who is constantly watching out for everyone else. We all do this. I was doing the double duty of parenting because Reade was working almost ninety hours a week, leaving me boss lady at home.

Because of the cancers in my family and both of my parents now dead of cancer, my fears are real. Would it come because I let a powdered plant insecticide touch my skin many years ago? Would I get cancer if I ate too much red food coloring? If I held onto anger at my sister? How about if I breathed in the gas fumes at the gas station? Or if I stood too close to the microwave? Or agreed to the x-rays at the dentist's office? How about if I'm not thinking enough positive thoughts? I was suspicious of everything.

In the doctor's office, I tell him that this unexpected blood is not normal for me. And that I am worried about cancer. He laughs and tells me that it's nothing.

"Oh, we are starting the change of life, are we?" he says looking out the window. Like he is my twin. Like I am a dum-dum who doesn't know what's going on in my own

body. I remind him that I've had two abnormal Pap smears and that something could be wrong.

'Highly unlikely. Let's wait a few months,' he says as he adjusts the window shade. An appointment is given to me for 3 months away.

Right before the appointment, the blood appears again. This time it feels like all of my blood drains from my head when I see it in the toilet. I become electrified with all senses on high alert. Animal instincts rise, like a bear or a lioness. I am a human enraged animal now. I am on fire in a closed room and I must get out now. I am frantic. I go to the office with no appointment and tell the receptionist that I need to be seen now. She looks angry that I would rock the office. She tells me,

"No. Your appointment is in two days. Come back then."

I leave the office, slamming the door on my way out and march to the car, wanting to call Reade, but he's working. I've talked to him about my fears, and he listens but he doesn't know my deep worries. He doesn't understand what it is to lose people to cancer. He's never lost someone like I have. He listens but doesn't really grasp what I'm saying. Just listens quietly like he's on the other side of a glass wall. When cancer takes people down and you watch the sorrow that sinks the families, the fear is real. My mother's sister left nine children behind. The youngest was four years old the Christmas Eve that she died. The loss of Mum's siblings destroyed her and she was never the same afterwards. The depression and sorrow of losing her sisters and her brother in so short a time devastated her artist's heart.

The fear has transformed me into my twenty-year-old self who writes in her diary that her only mother died a night in August of 1972.

In my mind while walking across the parking lot, I see the body of my mother on a stretcher draped in a white sheet. She is being carried down our front steps past my younger brother who has just returned home from a Beach Boys concert. He stands at our steps with his hands by his sides in a tie-dyed T-shirt and his hair below his shoulders, wearing strings of colored beads around his neck. He is watching Mum's body carried down the front walkway and slid into the back of a hearse.

And then I'm standing at the open grave of my mother where I take a carnation from the top of her coffin to keep and later stuff into a green glass bottle that I bought in Harvard Square. The fear brings me back to the rudderless state of growing into adulthood with no one to show me how to shave my legs, how to handle a menstrual period, how to have a checkbook.

I was a young girl adrift with a distraught father who stayed away from his wayward children as often as he could because he didn't know what to do. My mother had been long gone by the time she took her last breath.

That will not happen to my children, I think, as I make my way through the front door of the building. My children will not grow up without a mother and I will make sure of that with every fiber of my body. I will not permit the same situation for my children.

I know in the deepest part of me that I have reason to be afraid. Ovarian cancer and breast cancers have happened in my family to young mothers. After my cousin got both cancers, I looked up information about the genetic vulnerabilities for it. I looked up the symptoms of it and filed them away to remember in case I needed to refer to them. But right now, I had most of those symptoms and the abnormal bleeding was the warning. I had to get help.

I enter the examination room and wait in cold apprehension. I silently pray to God to take care of me. Please don't let this be cancer. There were so many women who had had it in my family, that I often prayed that "when I get cancer, please let it be detected early". It wasn't "if" I got cancer, but "when" I got cancer.

This doc is the kind of guy who would shake your hand without looking at you. He has the air of "M.D.-G.O.D". Whenever Reade and I go in for something we each get a bag of pills. This doc has a closet full of pill samples that he hands out like Halloween candy because he prescribes pills for everything. The pharmaceutical companies must be paying this guy well for pushing their products onto his patients because he's doing a great job of it. Last year Reade and I each contracted strep throat five times. We each took antibiotics five times before a teacher suggested that the kids might be carriers. Yes, indeed they were carriers. They got put on antibiotics once and that was the end of it, but in the meantime, Reade's and my systems got stripped of good bacteria that winter.

"You are 46 years old, and I'd guess that you are starting menopause," this doctor says with a patronizing cheerful smile.

I start talking fast. I try to explain that my mother died of cancer and that we don't exactly know what kind of cancer because it was so far advanced and my aunt died of ovarian cancer and my cousin has ovarian cancer and already had breast cancer. And her mother died of breast cancer on Christmas Eve and I couldn't talk fast enough. The doctor had a weird grin on his face and wasn't even listening to me.

"It's just the beginning of menopause," he is repeating.

“But I want a test to rule out cancer. I’m at the age they all were when they got cancer. They were all in their mid-forties like I am,” I try to explain. He’s flipping through papers. He is not listening.

I continue, “There is a test called a CA-125 marker test for ovarian cancer. I’d like to make sure it’s not ovarian cancer. I’d like to have that test, considering my family history.”

“No. And don’t worry about that,” he says. “It won’t do any good. Ovarian cancer has no symptoms at all. Besides, by the time it’s diagnosed, it’s always too late.”

I can hardly believe what he’s saying to me. I’m telling him that I have all 5 of the symptoms for it and he is blowing me off.

I’d brought a diagram of my family’s cancer history with me. I had drawn it up for him to see that there were four women in their mid-forties who had had gynecological cancers. I am thinking that surely, he will give me a referral now.

But again, he says, “No, I’ve told you that I handle everything right in this office. You don’t need a referral.” He tells me that he would like to do a “cone biopsy” on me in a few days.

“What’s a cone biopsy?” I ask.

“It’s a procedure that I do,” he replies, like it’s none of my business.

He tells me to take three ibuprofen for the procedure before I get into the office in a few days. “Do you mind if I perform this procedure in the presence of a medical student?” he asks.

“I guess not,” I say.

Because of the abnormal Pap smear, the tubal ligation has been put on hold even though I’ve had the EKG test. He tells me not to worry about the test result and that most

likely it's nothing. I want another general practitioner, so I start the process of trying to find one. I discover that if I'm lucky enough to find one who is taking new patients, there is a six month wait for an introductory appointment.

I head for the Bagel Shop where I meet two friends every Tuesday without fail. We usually sit and chat about our kids because each of us has a child who challenges us. We gravitate towards the Bagel shop every week and I depend on being there for my sanity as a mother. One of my friends is a pediatrician, but she's my friend first. I've already explained my health worry to them and my doctor friend agrees with me that I need to be seen by a specialist. Today she tells me that there is a GYN who has returned to the area and is looking for new patients. This same gynecologist had helped me when I had one of my babies. From the Bagel Shop I head directly over to her new office which is in a building across from the local hospital.

I am shaking with anxiety as I park my car in the lot of the hospital where she has her office. I walk through the glass doors and straight up to the receptionist's window. Most of the seats in the waiting room are filled with women reading magazines in the sun-filled room of giant windows and palm-leaf potted plants. Some babies sit on the laps of mothers.

I walk up to the sliding window of the receptionist.

"I would like to see Dr. Connery right away," I say. "I think I have an emergency situation that cannot wait. I need to see her immediately. I was one of her patients about five years ago before she left the area."

"And what's your emergency, I might ask?"

“I think I have ovarian cancer because I have symptoms of it. It runs in my family,” I tell her.

The woman at the window is silent. She looks at me without a word.

“Look behind you,” she says after a minute. “Do you see all of these people waiting in here? Do you really think that you can jump in ahead of all of these people on the premise that you think you have ovarian cancer?”

“I need to see her immediately,” I say.

“You can make an appointment like everyone else, ma’am,” she tells me. “No one jumps in ahead of anyone here. We are looking at a waiting period of three months now.”

“I understand and I’m sorry. It’s just that I can’t get a referral from my doctor to see a gynecologist and I need to see someone as soon as possible.”

I am on the edge of crying now.

“What do you mean, you can’t get a referral?”

“Just what I said, I have had two abnormal Pap smears and I want to see a specialist. My doctor won’t give me a referral to see a GYN. My mother died of cancer and I have three kids. I need to see someone right away. I’ve had two abnormal Pap smears. He is not listening to me!”

My voice has gotten louder. The waiting room has gotten quiet and people are looking at me.

“I’ll make an appointment and put you on a call list in case of a cancellation. That’s all I can do for you”.

I see her roll her eyes at the other woman sitting beside her. I am aware now that I may look like a crazy person to them. I try to pull myself together and straighten up. I

take the appointment that is three months away, then she slides her glass window over that separates her from the rest of us.

I rush out through the double doors. As I walk to my car, I break out into a sob and lean on my car before getting inside.

In two days, I get a call from the gynecologist's office to tell me that they have a cancellation that afternoon. I call my doctor friend to thank her for telling me about Dr. Connery coming back to town. She wishes me well and I rush off.

I am there a few minutes early to thank the receptionist.

“Thank you so much for calling me. I'm so sorry for being pushy, but I am frantic. Thank you again.”

She nods and slides her window closed.

Dr. Connery is tall, thin and kind. I recognize her right away as one of the doctors who took care of me during my third pregnancy. She walks towards me in her office which seems unusually large. She extends her hand to me.

“It's good to see you again, Martha. How are those little boys of yours?”

I can't make small talk and start right in on why I'm there, aware that I appear frantic. I am even aware that I may seem slightly crazed.

“I need your help, Dr. Connery. I have had two abnormal Pap smears. Dr. Smith is my doctor and he won't refer me to a gynecologist. I couldn't get an appointment without a referral. There is something very wrong inside me. My mother died of cancer and we have all these people in the family who have died of cancer. And now I had bleeding twice in between my periods and that never happens to me. I just need someone

to check my ovaries. There are three people with ovarian cancer in my family and two with breast cancer and I'm worried that it runs in my family and that I have it."

She takes my hand and gently says, "Let's have a look."

Her red-haired assistant is someone whose husband works for my husband and she leads me to a changing room to get ready, handing me a blue paper gown to be worn open in the front. It's summer but I'm cold from the fear. I lie on a table next to a machine with a telephone wire-like cord attached to it. It has a wand on the end. Dr. Connery seems even taller as she bends over me with the wand. She has a tube of KY jelly that she squirts on my abdomen. It's cold and makes me shiver a little. The wand waves on my belly. Back and forth in super slow motion. Stops. Then back and forth. Stops again and backtracks. Over the same area, Dr. Connery stops and starts. Then she wipes the jelly off my skin and takes off her gloves.

"Well," she says slowly. "I do see a mass...."

"What?! A mass? I knew it! A mass! A mass! How big? What is it?!"

"Yes, there is a mass, but I think we should wait a few months to see if it changes or dissolves on its own. It could be a cyst."

"No! You need to go in and look to see if it's cancer! There's no time to lose!" I say.

"Martha, I can't just go in and open you up just on the suspicion that it's cancer. That's unheard of. I never do that."

"Please, Dr. Connery, please. How else will I know?"

"No, Martha. That is not what I'm going to do."

I am doomed. I'm doomed. Just like my mother, I'm doomed. Darkness is closing in. I know that there is something wrong. Really wrong. I can't wait any longer and I've

waited long enough as it is. My gut is telling me that the house is on fire and that I need to Get. Out. Now. I will die if I don't get out now. It's my life that we are talking about. And I have three children. I start to cry. I tell Dr. Connery that I have three young children. I need to be here. She takes my hand again, but I pull away quickly.

“I know!! I didn't have the tubal ligation! I didn't have it! Sign me up for a tubal ligation!! I'd like it as soon as possible! You can look at the ovaries while you are doing it!”

“Well, I could do that,” Dr. Connery says as she handles some of her papers at a table. “As a matter of fact, I could do it next week for you.”

Again, I start to cry, but this time with relief because now I am getting somewhere. Now I can find out what is happening in my body.

As relieved as I am that a doctor is listening to me, there is still a ways to go. This new doctor was still telling me to “wait and see.” It's now the end of July. Since last summer, there have been two abnormal tests, an inconclusive cone biopsy test, a mass showing up on an ultrasound, 5 symptoms of ovarian cancer and two instances of abnormal bleeding. What more is needed? Why would this doctor want to “wait and see” too? Reade tries to be sympathetic to me. But he doesn't know what to do either and doesn't seem to feel the same urgency that I do.

Just five weeks before this doctor's appointment, when I learned I could go in to have my tubes tied and my ovaries checked in a surgery, I had started a new phase of my life. I had yearned for my own business for many years and finally I was in a position to do it. Years ago, in my mid-twenties, I'd managed a little quilt shop in Harvard Square, so that was the model for my shop. I was sure that I could run a successful retail fabric and quilt

shop. In the last couple of years, we had purchased the tiny cottage next door to our house, making it the perfect location. It was close to home where the kids could come in after school and do their homework while I waited on customers and taught sewing & quilting classes.

I was proud to do something that I loved and felt I could do it with grace. The little shop was fixed up with the help of a wonderful carpenter who constructed shelves for the gorgeous fabrics I'd chosen to display and sell. I had him install full-spectrum lighting throughout the shop to highlight the colors of the fabrics. It was a perpetual sunny day inside the shop and it couldn't feel happier inside. I was thrilled with how wonderful it looked when I opened the doors at the end of June in 1998. Customers arrived smiling because of the light, the colors, and the inspiration that was provided for the quilters. I really pushed myself to make this happen, while still making dinners for my family and getting my children off to school in the mornings, shopping for food for them and making sure they had summer activities to keep them busy. And of course, their feet were always growing and needing new sneakers. They wanted to help me too, so I let them put price tags on inventory and help me count the money at the end of the day. My little seven-year-old Isaac made himself a little circular nametag modeling it after the Walmart name tags that the employees wear,

“Hello, My name is Isaac. How can I help you?” He wanted to be the “Quilters Cottage” greeter of my customers.

On opening day of my new business, my friend Eileen entered the store, stopped and took a long and concerned look at me. Before even commenting on the shop, the first thing she said was,

“You look exhausted!”

She said it with such emphasis that I immediately thought that I looked horrible and should check myself in a mirror. When I finally had the chance to do so, I thought that, yes, I did have lines of exhaustion on my pale face. But it had been a stretch to get the shop set up for the opening, so of course, I'd be bone-tired. I was thoroughly, totally spent from the preparations. Although the first day was a success and I was feeling happy and high from building my dream into a reality, I was drained.

Four weeks after the opening, I got the date for the tubal ligation. The night before I was to go to the hospital, I was terribly upset with Reade because I was afraid that he wouldn't help with the kids if I didn't feel well afterwards. He is one of those guys who has trouble boiling water. Although he kept saying he would, I knew that his mind was elsewhere. He had his own business which was all-consuming of his time and energy. He worked hard and made sure we had our home warm with food on the table. But he wasn't home much, which put all child-rearing duties on me all the time. Any curve balls thrown at our family would not be easy.

The night before the surgery I walked across our yard to the shop so I could make sure that I had put away all the fabrics and neaten up the patterns and sewing notions. As I walked up to the front door, a car drove into the driveway. It was the two women I'd hired for gardening. I didn't have time now to make the front of the shop look inviting, so they planted flowers and kept the yard groomed. They saw that I was there and stopped in to say hello. They were a sweet mother and daughter-in-law team.

As I told them about going in for the surgery in the morning, I confided that I couldn't depend on Reade to help out. He was never home and was usually distracted and inattentive and as I was talking to these sweet women, I burst out crying.

The sobs were so hard that I couldn't talk. I sat down with my head on the table and sobbed for a solid five minutes. They kindly sat there telling me that they would help in whatever way that they could. I knew that my emotions were a culmination of the worry I'd been secretly hording for six months about cancer. I told them this and they just listened with compassion.

Reade took the time off to take me to the hospital in the morning. I was still uneasy and agitated about the procedure. There wouldn't be any more babies and I felt a sadness with that door closing for good. But I was sick with worry and anticipation. The unknowns were terrifying.

We arrived at the hospital and parked the car towards the back of the lot. It was to be a day surgery, so I didn't bring anything with me at all. Not even a purse. It was July 28th, 1998, the first year of my quilt shop. My Jesse was 11 years old, and the kind of kid who had his hands into everything, knew the most, and could figure out anything that I asked him to do. If we needed something to be set up with the VCR, a change of ink for the printer, or anything on the computer—he was our man. Lucas was 9 and the dream boy. He could construct an entire baseball team out of Fimo clay or make one out of paper, staples and Kleenex. He is the one to make everything fair and his heart is huge and kind. He spouts his baseball statistics as I say goodnight to him, even at nine. And our youngest, Isaac, who was 7 years old is a helper. He's the one at my side to cook and sew. He's the one to never miss an opportunity for me to read to him in his bed. I thought of my children as I walked in to the building with Reade.

We went to the registration and then I was ushered to a room in day surgery. Reade stayed in the room with me even after I'd gotten the gown on and climbed onto the

rolling metal bed. My blood pressure was taken and a little white soft clip attached to one finger. I got my temperature taken and then the anesthesiologist came in. He was my friend, Ann's husband, Dave. A quiet kind man. He told me that I might have a sore throat afterwards but that he would take good care of me. He put a paper shower cap on my head.

Dr. Connery stood at the door. She smiled at me and came to take my hand telling me how long the procedure would take. I bobbed my head, but I also looked right into her eyes and told her,

“Dr. Connery, if you do find cancer in me, you have my permission to take everything out. If there needs to be a total hysterectomy, you have my permission right now to do it, ok?”

Her eyebrows came together above her nose as she bent her head towards mine.

“You know, I think that you need to see a psychiatrist soon because this anxiety has become extreme. You need to be on a med for this. This procedure takes about one hour and you will be on your way home in an hour and a half.”

“But please, listen to me. If you find cancer in me, you have my permission to take everything out. Okay?” I said. “Okay?” I repeated.

She didn't answer me and turned and walked out the door. Reade took my hand and said not to worry. That I'd be alright and that he would be right outside the door waiting.

Only he wasn't. The hour and a half went by. He'd tried to wait, but he had work waiting for him at the newspaper that he had started thirteen years before. There is always so much to do at the paper and he had to make sure that the ad sales were keeping up with

the expenses. The time dragged on. He left his phone number with a nurse, telling her to please call when I was ready and he'd come right back. But the time wore on. And on. Five and a half hours went by before he received a call that I was out of the surgery.

He rushed back and was told by Dr. Connery that I had ovarian cancer. Stage two ovarian cancer and it had started to attach itself to the walls of my abdomen.

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