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MOTHERS AND SONS STORIES

BY

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award of the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing.

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Roy Robins 3 November 2003

Signed by candidate

University of Cape Town

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R.R.

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NOTE

The most substantial story in this collection, *Absence*, is the first third of a novel I am currently completing.

R.R.

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For my mother

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Il pleure dans mon cœur
Comme il pleut sur la ville
Paul Verlaine, *Romances sans paroles*

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ABSENCE

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Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.
Everything I do is stitched with its color.
W.S. Merwin, *Separation*

Absence. My heart grows tense as though a harpoon was sparring for the kill
(This is the house of the mentally ill.)
Robert Lowell, *Waking in the Blue*

He has been eating fire all evening, he said, and did not have enough money on him to eat anything else
that night.
Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*.

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One

When I was young I thought that happiness was something you sacrificed with childhood, that adults were unhappy people. I thought that you gave happiness away in return for sexual favours, in return for children of your own. I looked at my mother and she was unhappy. She was miserable. And I thought: *She's miserable because she's an adult. Therefore all adults are miserable.* I had a very Socratic way of thinking. Of course the only adults I knew were my mother and my teachers. I never thought: *My mother is unhappy because she's saddled with an equally unhappy child.* I never thought that what scared me about adulthood was sexuality, was the responsibility of sadness, of protecting my mother.

After my thirteenth birthday my mother began to tell me things that I did not want to know. In the mornings, when she drove me to school, she told me about the people she knew who had been 'taken' by cancer (and here I always imagined a giant crab, crushing whole families in its blood-red claws), about the men she had dated before my father, and about my father, who left when I was three. I realised that she needed to talk to someone, and that she was quite obviously alone. And yet I resented the closeness between us. Some mornings she told me about the affairs my father had had with other women, and the drive-in hotels he had taken them to, with names like The Kismet and The Shangri-La, and paper lanterns shining outside in the rain.

I confess that I was curious about these places and I took a girl to one once - Darling Cabins on Somerset Road - that boasted colour television and a pool table downstairs. Her name was Stacy Kaufman and she was in my English class in Standard nine. She was small and lean, with dark blonde hair cut clean across her brow. She was a ballet dancer, or had been

once. On Thursday afternoon, after school, we stayed behind and spoke on the stairs below the music room. There was something sullen and romantic about watching our teachers walk to their cars after class, talk to each other in an abrupt and offhand manner, become humans once again. In the hours before dusk, the children of my neighbourhood came to play cricket on the overgrown pitch, and Mrs Brockbank, the piano teacher and director of our annual school play (that year it was *Macbeth*, and awful), held her music appreciation class, which, judging by its regular attendance, was appreciated only by three or four seniors who came to flirt or finish their homework between the strained sounds of Bach.

All that term Stacy sat next to me in class. She wore her hair tied back from her neck, and when she sat down I could see that she wore no socks. She wrote poems in class (often, she used my shadow for cover); sketched pictures of the other kids, their legs and shoes. If I was lucky, she would lean over so close I could see the fine blonde hairs on her wrist, and write on the inside cover of my blue-bound English Comprehension book something like: *Boys don't make passes at girls with moustaches*, or *Do you think Talia Jacobs is pretty?* Some mornings she came to class with ink-stains on her hands and neck.

On Fridays we were let out early and most of us went to MacLean's Coffee Shop across the road, where we could smoke and gossip in the dark booths, or arrange an illicit weekend. I remember one particular afternoon when Stacy and I were sitting alone at a table at the back. It must have been after four, because MacLean's was almost empty, and the waitress, a plump girl in a headscarf, was opening all the windows to air out the smell of smoke.

Stacy had taken off her blazer and tie, rolled up her sleeves, and was in the process of extracting a cigarette from her plastic pencil case. She smoked just three cigarettes a day, she had told me, proudly, the first time we ever spoke. Though I did not smoke, I kept a folder of matches in my pocket to light her three cigarettes. I loved watching her smoke, the casual yet

complicated movements of her hands and mouth, the smell of it on her afterwards, gritty and intimate.

When she leaned over to open her knapsack, her leg touched mine. She removed three library books: *The House of Mirth*, *The Day of the Locust*, and *The Collected Poems of Christina Rossetti*. This was a game we used to play. She would tell me what she was reading, and then I would tell her what I was reading - though I don't think either of us was especially interested in what the other was reading. A conversation about literature was merely a pretence to speak about everything else. Talking about literature was alluring and adult and sexy, like smoking.

'I love reading two or three books at a time,' she said. Her voice was both decisive and distracted. 'I mean, not at the *exact* same time, obviously, but you know what I mean. That way, when you get really absorbed in a novel, when the tension becomes unbearable and you absolutely have to finish reading it, you can put it down and start a completely different book. That way you prolong the pleasure - otherwise it's all over too quickly. I figured this out years ago. When I was a kid I used to read in bed for hours after my bedtime. I would put my bedside lamp under the covers with me - until one night I almost set myself on fire.'

'I used to do the same thing,' I said, 'except I read with a torch.'

'Really?' I could see her reflection in the window when she blew out smoke. I knew that my mother would ask if I had been smoking, after she kissed me hello.

'Yes. I would lie there with this plastic camping torch, and my mother would see the reflection from the hallway and come in and tell me to switch it off and go to sleep. I would wait for her to leave, wait until I was sure she was on the phone or in the study or running a bath, and then I would switch the torch on again. She had a way of making sure whether or not I was asleep. She would lean over and kiss me on the forehead, and if I flinched, she knew

I was awake. I hated being kissed.' This was perhaps not the wisest thing to say under the circumstances, and so I added quickly, 'by my mother, I mean.'

She seemed excited that we had something in common, and this, in turn, excited me. The fact that she had stayed with me this long meant she liked my company, liked me. She knew I was withdrawn, had odd interests and few friends. She knew this and yet she sat with me still. *Withdrawn* was often a euphemism for *depressed* - perhaps she knew this too.

I wanted to keep her talking, to sit beside her and smell her hair, and then offer to walk her home. I had never been to her house, though I knew where it was, had thought of it often on my way home from school. I imagined visiting her one evening: she would be in her after-school clothes, barefoot, moving from room to room, her body light and quick as a ballet dancer's. I imagined watching from a window as she sat down to dinner with her mother and father. For Stacy was perfect, and her family would be perfect: contented, exultant, alive. I was ashamed of my parents: my father, whom I had not seen for months, and my mother, who was sickly and struggling at work.

I was in love with Stacy and all girls knew when you were in love with them - the way they seemed to sense it when you stared at the back of their heads in class. This was instinctive human knowledge: knowing who loved you, and whom to love. At night I dreamt about a girl who would be made breathless by the sound of my voice, like the girls I read about in comic books.

'I could never understand why I wasn't allowed to read all night,' Stacy said. 'How can you punish a child for reading too much? It's like punishing her for eating too many vegetables or for finishing all her homework on time. But then my family don't exactly *read*. My father's idea of great literature is one of those *Reader's Digest* annotated classics - and even those take him months to get through. And my mother's just as bad - she reads books with titles like *He Knows When You Sleep* and *They Kill at Night*. I don't know why she reads

those books, I mean, she's paranoid enough as it is. And she pretends she doesn't enjoy them, that's the sad thing, as if she reads them just to *educate* herself or something. And I still feel like a criminal whenever I read through the night. So, I try and read criminal books.'

'What's a criminal book?'

'Oh, I don't know. I think John Donne is a criminal writer. Kafka is a criminal writer. Emily Dickinson is like a nun, but I always think that she would have read your diary when you weren't looking or rummaged through your underwear drawer or listened in at the door when you were having a private conversation. That's what I mean when I talk about a criminal writer. A real criminal writer has to admit to the deepest motives, and she has to sacrifice herself to them. When Christina Rossetti says: *My life is like a broken bowl, / A broken bowl that cannot hold / One drop of water for my soul* - well, then she's being a criminal writer.

I could hear the waitress on the telephone, her voice muffled yet occasionally aggressive. I could hear her say: *That's not the point, I waited for an hour and a half*. And then I could hear her turn away. Then, in a voice which attempted a whisper but failed miserably: *What makes you so sure I'll come out with you on Saturday?* In the sense that her question had failed as a whisper, it had failed as a question too, and now he was talking and she was listening. She was trying not to listen. I could tell by the way she shuffled her feet, ran her fingers along the counter, looked sideways at our table to make sure we could not overhear.

'Why did you give up ballet?' I asked.

I knew all at once it was the wrong thing to say.

'*Who* told you I gave up ballet?' I had forgotten it was a secret.

'You did, last term.' I was suddenly embarrassed.

'Oh, right, of course I did. Well, a lot of reasons, I guess.'

I could think of nothing else to say. Through the window, I looked onto Spin Street, where a drunk had stepped into the middle of the road, as if to direct traffic. He wore baggy brown shorts, a grey sweatshirt, a baseball cap that said *Knicks* on it in raised red letters. When he opened his mouth to shout at a passing car, I saw that he had no front teeth. For a moment we looked at each other, then he ambled back across the road. A woman, wearing a shawl which looked as if it had been sewn out of potato sacks, pushed a shopping trolley loaded with strips of aluminum siding, broken bottles, plastic packets, and old telephone directories. It was no longer safe to walk here after dark. Transvestite prostitutes used this street as a pick-up point, their eye-shadow glowing damply beneath the traffic lights, their skin puckered and frayed, their hard mouths working at a cigarette. Their smoking always gave them away - you could tell a man by the way he dragged on a cigarette. *Criminal writers.*

‘Come,’ Stacy said, putting down her coffee cup. ‘Now you can walk me home.’

It was close to six. We walked past the video store with its faded posters, past the halaal butchery and the retail clothing shops. The smell of meat and spices hung heavy in the air. Only the mannequins revolved in the lighted window of Nazli’s Fashions - the same mannequins I had seen, month after month, on the way home from school. The manager of Solly Kramer’s Discount Liquors was locking the security gate with a ring of keys, the outline of a holster visible beneath his jacket pocket. Men sat under the black and yellow awnings, drinking wine out of paper bags, sharing a cigarette.

She carried a knapsack on one shoulder, and I held her books for her. We were both excited and walked slowly, though her house was some five blocks away, and it was late enough for our mothers to worry. But mothers would worry regardless: this was their responsibility, as it was our responsibility to come home to them eventually, to eventually

leave them behind. It was exciting to walk down a long street with a beautiful girl, to wish that the street would be endless, the moment permanent, that I would not dissatisfy her.

It was April. Already the street lights were burning, and strange men in felt hats and rugged jackets leaned up against walls or flattened newspapers on benches for the night. A boy in a blue coat, long enough to sit upon, held out packets of raisins to passing cars. Slowly, from somewhere, the sharpness of dagga smoke could be felt rather than smelt.

On the corner of Osborne Road, beside a vacant factory shop with its boarded up windows and blackened brick, she touched my hand. My heart beat loud as a school bell. I wanted to kiss her, but did not know how to ask. *You're nervous*, she had told me once, *nervous and restless*. And then: *You never look at me for long*. Perhaps what she meant to say was: *You never look at me for long enough*. The truth is I felt threatened by her: her ballet, her literature, her poetry - it was all too much for me. Sometimes she would pass me in the corridor without even saying hello. So self-absorbed I was afraid to touch her - or maybe I was afraid all the same.

We talked - talked about everything all of a sudden.

'You make me laugh, Aidan,' she said. 'I mean, you're easy to talk to. I like talking to you.'

I loved the way she pronounced my name: loved the fact that at that moment it belonged to both of us, that she had taken the trouble to form it, that I meant this much to her. I wanted to thrill her, to impress her beyond words. *Beyond words*: the place where true intimacy begins.

'I wish I was old enough to drive. Then I could take you home.' This was meant to sound adult and assured: the kind of thing other boys would say. And yet it was not innocent of implications: there were many things one could do in a car.

'My father has this old car,' she said. 'It's been sitting there for years. My father broods, his car broods. Everyone broods. It's the law in my house.'

'What about your mother?'

'My mother still tells me I read too much. I think a part of her wants me married and knocked up by the time I'm seventeen. God knows where we'd live. In the garage, probably.'

I had almost said, *I'll marry you*, as a joke, but had stopped myself just in time.

'What about you? Do you have any brothers and sisters?'

But I did not want to talk about my family.

'One sister.' And then, so she would not ask any other questions, 'She lives in Chicago now.'

'Do you miss her?'

'A little.' This seemed like the right thing to say. 'I kind of forgot about her after a while.'

All I really wanted was for someone to make me feel less strange about my life, to make me feel accepted and admired. Perhaps she had heard other people talking about me. When people spoke about you it meant you were not unimportant - even if they said you were unimportant, they were speaking about you, and that meant something.

Someone had strung Christmas lights around a bare white pine, and she stopped under it to tie up her hair. A lamplit armpit. I could see the curve of her cheekbone and the down on her upper lip and, when she turned away, the almost invisible hairs on the back of her neck. In her flat school shoes she was almost exactly my height, and that meant a lot to me.

'You know what's strange,' I said. 'Traffic lights changing colours on empty streets. Beautiful women eating alone at restaurants. Sitting alone in an empty cinema, or sitting alone in a cinema where everyone is with someone else.'

'You're strange,' but she said it softly.

'So are you.'

Inside the barred window of Isaacson Electronics a bank of television screens replayed yesterday's rugby match. A cardboard hand moved back and forth like a windscreen wiper.

'You know, you'd be quite good looking if you cut your hair,' she said. 'And if you stopped looking at the ground all the time.'

'My hair isn't long ' I looked at the ground. 'You should see it when it's long. Then it gets curly and I hate it when it's curly.'

'It's long enough.'

'I wanted to kiss you a while ago.'

'You should have,' but she turned away.

'I should have.'

We took a short cut across the bridge and into the park. In the summer children jumped backwards off this bridge in their underwear, plunging one after the other into the dirty river water, their shouts echoing above the footpath and into the pines. The kids who slept below the railway platform dug for hours in the silt for coins thrown from the bridge. Old clothes floated to the surface, broken porcelain, bottle tops, dolls with missing arms or legs. But now the river was still and clear, and we could see our reflection in the water when we passed, our shadows lengthened by the lights above the bridge.

Weeds grew ragged behind the railway tracks. Beneath a wooden signboard which said NO SWIMMING, two lovers, our age or younger, dangled their bare feet off the edge of the bridge, their faces flushed and unembarrassed.

Lizards swept backwards into bushes at the sound of our footfall. I could hear the wheedling voices of boys on bicycles, crackling dead leaves as they coasted down the dust path, calling to each other. Across the way, the bells of Saint Michael's chimed six o'clock. Always, after the last strike of a clock, you could feel the electric stillness in the air.

We sat on one of the benches that overlooked the halfpipe where kids skated in the late afternoon. I wanted everyone to see us together; wanted to be left with her alone. To lay her down on a blanket of pine needles. To kiss her thighs. The words hurt. To say it slowly, write it out: *I want to kiss your thighs* - this was enough. An excruciating ecstasy of imagining: lifting off her blouse, kissing her shoulders, her neck, her underwear, the smooth taut bones of her thighs.

She smoothed down her skirt. 'I used to come here after school to smoke. My brother would come down on his bicycle to spy on me. We have this deal. If he doesn't tell my mother I smoke, I won't tell her about the magazines under his bed. She already knows about the magazines, but I'm not telling him that. She says she's waiting for the right time to talk to him about it, which means just before he gets married or something.'

'My father used to take us here every Saturday morning. This was years ago, back when he was still working from home.' She pointed. 'We used to have races, there, where the halfpipe is now.'

'The kids who skated there always scared me. They were so wild. And they always seemed bigger. And they always seemed bigger. Even when I was bigger, they scared me.'

She showed me a scar on her knee from skating last summer. I wanted to kneel down and kiss it, but touched it instead - the skin as smooth as the head of a match. I put my hand on her forehead as if to feel for a temperature or to wipe away a stray hair. Her brow was warm and damp with sweat. She drew close to me and I kissed her slowly. For a moment, she put her hand on the back of my neck.

'I live just down the road,' she said. 'You can come for dinner, if your mother won't mind.'

'My mother won't mind,' I said. 'We eat late anyway.'

Two

Stacy told me her father was an accountant and her mother owned a florist in Newlands where she worked in the summer vacation. I told her my mother edited educational books and my father was a doctor in Sydney. These were both lies: my father lived in Muizenberg and my mother was a secretary at the Commodore Career Training Centre in Claremont. She wore a headset and fielded calls or typed dictation or answered other people's letters. Her office was on the fifth floor of an enormous red brick complex that overlooked the railway station and the taxi ramp. On the days when I read in the library until late, I would come home this way, knowing that my mother would still be at her desk. We had this much in common: we were both ashamed of her job.

The complex lobby was painted in cool pastel colours - lime, peach, olive-green - and the chairs were all leatherette and hot to the touch. A black man in a blue uniform sat behind a wide pine desk reading a magazine. He knew me and waved me through the security door.

All the way up in the elevator I examined myself, loosened my tie, combed my fingers through my hair, tried not to look in the glass. I knew that the 'girls' who worked with my mother, who were closer to my age than to hers, would tease me, would say, 'have you finished your homework, Aidan?' or, more seductively, 'I'll help you with your work if you help me with mine.' It excited and shamed me to be teased like this in front of my mother.

Certain elevators seemed designed solely to confront you with the image of your self. Riding up five floors with my pocket Nietzsche jangling in my bag, I thought: *I have no proof that I exist, or that others exist around me, but I know for certain that I have a pimple on my chin.* From the fountain on the first floor came the soft and sleepy sound of rushing water.

You always wanted to urinate on the long journey upwards. Beautiful, leggy secretaries rode up and down on these elevators, inspecting themselves in the full-length glass, picking their teeth or re-applying lipstick worn out since lunch. It was all captured on close-circuit camera.

Under her plastic headset, in her make-up and burgundy jacket, my mother behaved like a different person. I sat in her cubicle paging through magazines with titles like *Your Finance* and *Young Professional Today*. Sometimes back issues of *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* were left lying in the conference room. I read 'Ten Ways to Make Your Bank Work for You', 'Julia, the woman who was made for pleasure - and trouble', 'She thought he loved her, until it was too late. Now she knows better - you will too!'

From where I sat I could smell nail varnish, fresh ink and stale air. I could hear the click-click of the electric fan above my head. From down the corridor came the surge and pulse of the copy machine, the hum of a hundred telephones, the rattle of the tea trolley, and the footsteps of the cleaning lady with her mop and her scowl. In the next cubicle Colleen, the girl who, according to my mother, changed her hair colour more often than her stockings, was saying, 'Commodore Career Training Centre, how may I help you? Commodore Career Training Centre, how may I help you?' over and over, like a child repeating a forbidden word.

'I'll just be ten minutes,' my mother would say, which meant she'd be at least another hour. She had stapled a Monet print to the board above her desk and a card I had made for her fiftieth birthday lay open on the empty bookshelf. She once told me that she did not want to keep anything permanent in her office in case she lost her job. She had trained as a social worker, had been retrenched from her long-time position at the Wynberg Home for the Retired. My sister and I called it the Wynberg Home for the Expired. My mother despised her job, but she committed herself to it entirely and I resented her for this. If she did something, she had to do it properly, she said.

'I put in nine hours a day,' she told me. This was on the drive home and I could tell by her voice that she was tired and irritable. Sometimes it was easier just to walk the rest of the way. 'And I hate it. But I do it as well as anyone else. And I could be fired tomorrow.'

Grudgingly, I switched off the radio.

'Now you're being paranoid.' This chastisement was something of a ritual, but gentle.

'Cynthia van Niekerk was fired like this,' she snapped her fingers. She had learnt this from my father. 'And that was that. No medical aid, no benefits. I watched her pack up her desk - her *cubicle*,' my mother always said this word scornfully. 'And she has three sons at home. I only have one.'

But this made me feel guilty - guilty and angry.

'Why do you have to make me feel bad?' I said. 'What do you want me to do? It's not like I'm old enough to get a proper job.' And you're too old to get a proper job, I could have said, though this would have hurt her more than I intended, and it would take days before she forgave me - if she forgave me at all.

'I didn't mean to make you feel bad,' she said. 'I'm just worried, that's all. Just because you don't tell me anything about your life doesn't mean I'm not allowed to tell you about mine.'

It bothered her that I told her nothing about my life. She needed someone to talk to - like me, she had few friends.

We drove past the Methodist church, the charity bookstore, the empty, dusty streets. I watched two girls scramble across the railway tracks, holding their shoes in their hands. Someone had written THE JUNKY FUNKY KIDS, across the brick wall of a substation, in red paint, like blood. The burnt-out shells of abandoned cars sat smoking in the evening.

'If you want I could drop out of school and get a full-time job somewhere.' I said this to threaten her, though I had been seriously considering it the last few months. I doubted I would hate anything as much as I hated school.

Abruptly, she leaned over to touch my cheek. 'God, no - you're struggling at school as it is.'

It was true, I was failing three of my classes, but I didn't exactly need to be reminded.

'I'm not struggling. It just doesn't interest me.' I had invented this distinction: If school interested me, I would excel at it, but since it didn't, I wouldn't. 'Nothing interests me. I can't concentrate on anything.'

I knew this would worry her but I said it anyway. I said it because at that moment I wanted to worry her.

'I know,' she said. 'You think I don't know, but I know. Believe me, I know.'

Sometimes I said things I knew I shouldn't say. I knew I shouldn't say them but I said them all the same. Independent of my body, my mouth did its own thing: self-sufficient, self-destructive. It couldn't help itself. Then my body would have to apologise for my mouth's mistakes: I would have to embrace my mother, I would have to watch her cry. Occasionally, she would not allow me to embrace her. *You hate touching me*, she would say, *I wouldn't want to contaminate you*. This was my punishment.

She did not believe that I loved her. I wanted to scream at her, to say: *I'm your son, for God's sake, not your husband or your lover. Of course I love you, I just can't tell you*. But how could I say all this to her? Stubbornly, my mouth, whose fault all this was, refused to comply with my heart.

'Well, then maybe you should get a job.' She said this to antagonise me.

'Maybe I should move out. Then you would do alright, I guess.'

'Well, then I would sell the house.' This was a threat - she knew I loved that house.

'No need to be alone in such a big old house.'

'It isn't big.'

'It is, without Stella. Without you, it would certainly be big.'

She made a jagged, greedy lunge of a left turn. The indicator was broken and I had to remind her to roll up the window and point. She scrunched up her forehead so that two diagonal lines appeared between her brows. One of the woman who worked with my mother had a placard on her desk that read: *Wrinkles are hereditary - parents get them from their children.*

'Your father would be delighted if you dropped out of school. He would stop paying for you in a second, and then where would you work?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I could write for magazines.'

'Write about what? And for whom? They've got qualified journalists for that. Look at me, I went to university for five years and I spend my days answering the phone with a bunch of girls fresh out of high school.'

'If I was an acrobat, I would join the circus.'

'You would fall off the trapeze,' she said. 'And I don't know how I'd pay for your operation. I'd have to get another job.'

'You could work in the circus too.'

'Who would I be - the bearded lady or the fat woman on the bicycle?'

'Both,' I said. I had never seen my mother ride a bicycle. 'You could be the bearded fat woman on the bicycle.'

'Then you'd really be ashamed of me.'

This wounded her - that she knew I was ashamed of her.

I snapped my fingers to annoy her, but she didn't notice. *Your father's son.* I had told him that I never wanted to see him again. He had sat in his car, in his faded khaki suit, with his white coat on, and said nothing. I handed him a letter and watched his face while he read it to himself. After a while he stopped moving his mouth while he read and just sat there, and just sat there reading the same sentence over and over. I liked to think it was the sentence that went: *If I ever have children of my own, I will never allow you to see them. I will tell them their grandfather is dead.* There was more of this, but he crumpled up the letter and placed it on the empty seat behind him. There was something gentle in that touch - unwrapping, removing this gift I had delivered to him. Delivered, but also entrusted, forsaken, transferred from me to him. *I give you back this burden, that belongs to you alone.*

His sleeves were rolled up and I looked at his hands: the slender wrists, curved like a girl's, the wiry white hair and bitten-down nails. There was a fine line of dried blood on his upper lip, where he had cut himself shaving. He hated to see his reflection in the morning, shaved by feel in the darkness of the bathroom or waited until the mirror was steamed up and he could see nothing when he looked in the glass. I knew this because I did the same thing.

I wanted to make him cry, the way my mother often cried at something I said or refused to say or couldn't quite put into words. *I love you.* I wanted to humiliate him, to destroy him utterly, so that he would no longer wish to be my father, as I no longer wished to be his son. I looked at his face because I wanted to see the damage I had done to it, to read the fervour of my letter in the bags beneath his eyes. I wanted to hold the image of his face in my mind, because stupidly I thought I would never see it again.

'I'll read the rest later,' he said coldly, 'if that's alright with you.'

It was Thursday - a cold, sleety afternoon. The front fender of his white Toyota Corolla gleamed with last night's rain. I sat there in my uniform, in my white woolen school socks, my feet drawn up against the dark wood of the dashboard. The heater was still ticking,

though he had switched off the car. I was sixteen and slow to move. I was lean, pale, my ruffled dark hair thicker than his. I rolled up my window to clean the frost off the glass. From this angle I could see into my house, where my father was no longer allowed, into the lighted kitchen window, where my mother was busy preparing dinner. She wore a charcoal cable-knit sweater, and her thick black hair, streaked here and there with grey, was cut short as a boy's. I watched her sprinkle garlic over a freshly baked potato with an air of absent-minded expertise. There was something almost drowsy about her movements - I knew them so well. Then I heard the telephone ring, and my mother hurried from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her slacks. I could easily imagine her voice on the phone. *Really*, she would be saying to one of her friends. She would nod her head, shift her feet, clasp a pen between her fingers like a cigarette. *Well, I never. Well, that certainly serves her right.*

'You should have told me before,' my father said. He was sober then, when it hurt the most.

'I wanted to,' I said, 'I just never had the guts.'

'Well, now you've told me. Congratulations.'

He leaned over to fasten his seatbelt. Then I heard the engine stirring and, along with it, the classical station which, when I heard it outside of these Thursday visits, always made me think of him.

'You should probably get out of the car now,' he said. 'I mean, I'm going to go.'

I believed that this was the most powerful moment of my life. I felt delirious with power: heartless, relentless, alive. I had spent hours writing that letter, over and over, washing my hands so the ink wouldn't smudge, imagining the look on his face as he slammed shut the door, his hands shaking like a blind man feeling for his cane on the ground. My anger would rouse him into anger of his own - that was the point. If he would not hurt me on his own

terms, I would compel him to hurt me, once and for all. If I wanted a moment of consummation, of absolution, I would have to create it - I had no illusions about that.

Slowly, I opened the door. Coils of jasmine grew around the street lights, wild and sweet and cold as ice. Damp, crackling copper leaves, blown sand, and bits of broken glass collected in the gutters. I knew that my mother would be setting the table for dinner, would be whistling under her breath, or talking to herself the way she sometimes did. Her hands would be warm from the oven still, and her cheeks would be red, and her brow would wrinkle when she lifted the lid off the pot. I would have to blow on my soup to cool it down.

But I did not want this moment to be over - it was worth too much to me.

'I always thought you knew how I felt,' I said.

'How could I?' his voice was sharp. 'I mean, I always assumed that you loved me.'

And then, as he drove away, I realised that I did love him, had loved him all along. I loved him and I hated him, because he was my father, because he had hurt me, because I did not know him at all. Perhaps that is why I had given him the letter, to ensure that he was yielding, forgiving, that he loved me as much as I secretly suspected he should. Perhaps my note was nothing more than a love letter turned inside out. Who else but someone who loved and loved deeply would write anything as awful as that? It took you years before you realised you loved the people you hated most and hated only yourself.

There was one memory that stood out above the others. I was eight and he had come into our house though he wasn't allowed in anymore and was holding his arm around my neck like a noose. He had come to beg my forgiveness, he said. I was screaming, tearing at the curtains, holding on to anything other than him. Whenever I tried to move, he moved with me: tightening his grip, quickening his feet, repeating over and over the same words that were not words at all.

He had gone crazy again, had been phoning all evening, whispering and shouting, accusing me of lying to him, of being poisoned by my mother. I was small enough to fit under the telephone table where I could stifle my cries in the dark. *Don't try to make me feel sorry for you*, I could hear him say. *You, you should feel sorry for me. I know all your tricks, you little rat*. I bit down on the collar of my sweater so that he would not hear me cry. Then my mother came down the passage, saw me under the table, the phone in my hand.

She knew what had happened - it had happened before. Even manic depression was as predictable as heartache or the temper tantrums of a very young child: the cycles, the gestures, the means and its end. And he *was* like a child: angry for a moment, for a whole week once; never sober, never still. A child who needed to be soothed by soft hands and soft words, to be consoled by a bedtime story or a form of atonement, to have at his disposal a telephone to terrorise or a wrist to sink his teeth into like an epileptic coming to the last sweet surge of a fit. My father, a child, being mothered by my mother. My twin.

She held me on her lap while she spoke to him, smoothing down my hair, cooling with her breath my damp cheeks. Sometimes at night I craved for her to come and hold me like this, to put me against her breast, and not say for one instant: *You're too old, you're too big, sleep*, but to wait until I fell into sleep, or fell into her, for they felt like the same thing after a while. Strange that it cost so much to purchase this affection from my mother. As if he had been right all along, and I had angered him on purpose and this was my reward. My punishment and my reward. My father and my mother.

I heard my mother tell him that if he phoned once more that night she would call the police.

'And tell them *what?*' I could hear his voice from where I sat. 'To come and arrest me? For what? For being a father, Ruth? For being a concerned father, like any other father? When did that become a crime?'

And then she started screaming, like a mad person, like him.

‘You should see what you’ve done to this boy. He’s shivering, he’s weeping, he’s practically curled up at my feet. I hope you’re proud of yourself, Robert. It takes some kind of man to torment his own son. You know what kind of man? I’ll tell you exactly what kind of man - a sick man, a man who needs help. You’re not right in the head, Robert. Can’t you see that? Isn’t it obvious by now? Don’t you know yourself well enough to know when you’re ill like this?’

He said something under his breath that I couldn’t quite hear.

‘How dare you,’ my mother said. She said it softly, sharply, in the voice she used to tell me to go right to bed when it was very late. ‘How dare you.’ She said it over and over, and she looked at me, from time to time, to make sure I understood.

She hung up the telephone and placed the receiver on the table so that he couldn’t call again. She kneeled on the uncarpeted kitchen floor to wipe my face with a pearl-grey handkerchief stitched with the letter *R*. I moved away from her, but she held me still.

‘I’m sorry about your father. He’s sick, you know. Don’t hate him - I mean don’t blame him. There’s nothing he can do about it. He gets into these states and he takes everyone along with him. He’ll be better soon, if he takes his pills. But he is your father, and he loves you, Aidan. You’ve always been his favourite child.’

From across the corridor I could hear the sound of my sister, sleeping. She was six years older than me and slept with her door half open, though she pretended she wasn’t afraid. She slept lightly but snored like a siren. Her five-year-old collie, Mollie, slept on the quilted blanket beside her. Some nights when I couldn’t sleep I would tap on Stella’s door with my fist and she would sit upright and say ‘What?’ very loudly and Mollie would whine softly and jump up on the bed. ‘Are you asleep?’ I would ask. ‘Yes, I’m asleep,’ she would shout, ‘I’m talking in my sleep. And you know what I’m saying? I’m saying you’re *stupid, stupid, stupid.*’

'Will you be able to sleep tonight?' My mother asked.

'No.' This wasn't true but I wanted to stay up with her for as long as I could.

'Come,' she said, 'let's get some chocolates from the lounge.'

But I did not move.

'I would carry you if you weren't so big.' She said this to flatter me - she could carry me still, I knew. The moment she could no longer carry me, the moment in which I had no choice but to carry her, was the moment I feared most of all.

'I'm not *that* big.'

'Not yet,' she said.

There was one word that every child longed to hear, one word it took to make you fall asleep. *Hush*: that was the word. Curled up like a snake and soft as sleep itself: *Hush*. From your mother's mouth to your ears, your whole body tingling in its warm bed, wrapped in the blankets of sensation, in this *hush* of love, this endless unending *s* that travelled like a train from one night to the next. More comforting than a hundred thousand kisses, than a book full of bedtime stories, than waking early on Sunday morning knowing full well that your school clothes were in the wash. *Hush*: love was like sleep, you tumbled into its embrace, and though you could not account for it, you returned to it nightly, tightly, whole.

For as long as there was a *hush*, there was someone behind that *hush*, someone standing at the doorway, bending to your mouth with a *hush*-kiss, smoothing down your pillow, smoothing down your hair, switching off your lamp and reminding you to say your prayers. And what did I pray for? *Please God, let my mother live forever. Let me die first. Let her always be beside me. Don't let my father hurt her. Don't let me ever become like my father. Forgive me for all the lies I told at school today. Please God* - for my mother believed in God, and therefore for her sake if not for mine, I had to pray to him on her behalf - *do not forsake her*. For I knew that there was no one to tell my mother *hush*. No one but God. God,

to whom all those who had no one to *hush* to, turned to, asking for mercy, for pity, for keys to the city of sleep.

Sleep of faith. To deny sleep was to deny life. To live with no sleep was to be a manic like my father, and no one loved my father when he was demented and diseased. He could not help himself, I knew. My mother had explained it to me before. Just the way as a child I had peed in my bed, in my sleep, and couldn't help it, hardly even knew what I had done - well, my father was the same way with his moods.

It was half past nine. A windless night, but cool, cold. Outside the kitchen window, my mother's cat, Tazio, named after the object of desire in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, mewled to be let in. Tortuous, in an ecstasy of impatience, he wrapped himself against the glass. His slow sound unravelled like a ball of yarn. My mother stood on tiptoes to open the window with its crossbars and rusty, busted frame. She had on the woolen slippers she wore when it was too late for visitors and too early for bed. He came in slowly, effortlessly unwinding his bent and bony body. But he had been waiting for some time and was angry with us now. Tail at twelve and body throbbing sweetly, he marched across the kitchen counter. Though it had not rained that night, he was wet - he was always wet, from stalking lizards in the marsh behind the construction site. Marsh-mellowed, he smelt of damp silt, brick-dust, waterweed and jasmine. Beneath his paws, all surfaces punctured like piano keys. Bitter and bristling, he glanced at each of us in turn, as if to remind us of our insignificance.

It was August and he was dolorous. With an air of electric indifference, he clambered onto the table, spilling half a dozen cookery books, one long steel spoon, and a toy soldier whose crooked helmet clattered against the hardwood floor. Then, as if by way of compensation, he torpedoed into the lounge where his favourite chair was. It had been my favourite chair once - he had stolen it from me in a battle of wills, or claws, I was never sure which.

Tadzio's favourite chair was a bentwood rocking chair that my grandmother had given us before she moved into the old age home. She had gotten it into her head that she was going to die before her seventy-fifth birthday and started giving everything away. Even things no one wanted - old railroad maps, books of political cartoons from the nineteen thirties, a box full of *Reader's Digests* ('and there's nothing less appealing than an old edition of *Reader's Digest*,' said my sister, who liked to comment on things she knew nothing about), weird masks that my grandfather had collected from Angola with hollowed-out eyes and blood-red mouths, cocktail shakers, a copy of Errol Flynn's biography *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, inside of which my grandmother had scribbled in pencil, *I have never forgotten him in Captain Blood - saw it when I was fifteen. Took my brother David, he wanted to see it just for the title.* Often I would find odd poems written in the margins of odd books. For instance, this poem pencilled across the title page of a book entitled *The Lost Loves of Vincent Van Gogh - Waiter, oh waiter, I'd rather eat sooner than later.*

Like Stella, my grandmother would read the same half a dozen detective novels over and over, though, unlike Stella, she could never remember which was which. And she was fiercely proud - too proud to admit that she no longer knew who I was when I came to visit, or that every time she saw Stella she thought it was my mother, even if Stella and my mother came together. I could never understand this kind of confusion: my grandmother imagined that two versions of my mother, young and old, were alive at once, existing side by side like Siamese twins. *Ruth*, she would say, looking at my mother but clasping Stella's hand. A different kind of madness from my father's - more sober and sensible, sadder somehow, but also more metaphysical, time bent backwards like old joints, the past as fluid as water, as clean as air. After a while Stella pretended to be my mother, and my mother always wept on the drive home.

Toward the end she couldn't even walk down a passage without looking in every doorway to see if she could find my dead grandfather, sitting waiting for her in the next room with the newspaper spread out on his lap. And her rheumatism was terrible - we were waiting to see which one would kill her, waiting for her to die.

Before she began to lose her mind, my grandmother lived alone in a great gabled house in Kenilworth with a wrought-iron trellis and a pitched slate roof. She hated my father, had never forgiven him for leaving my mother, for wounding her family's pride. I don't think she could ever forgive the fact that my mother had married a man who was not well, or that unwell man had left my mother, her daughter, for a series of other women. The child of immigrant Russian Jews, she spat whenever she mentioned his name. *That bastard*, she would say, the hard word thrilling me even then. *That horrible man*.

'Don't talk about him like that. He's the children's father,' was always my mother's response.

'Don't remind me,' she said coldly, brushing back her hair, which was long and smooth and black still. She would have been beautiful if she wasn't so frightening. Pride pained her more than anything - this shame belonged to her alone. She held grudges longer than certain European countries.

She cut out my father's face in the wedding pictures on the chiffonier. I would look at my headless father, knowing full well that he could not look back at me.

'I knew he was no good the moment your grandfather and I met him,' she would tell me, whenever she had the chance. *She was doing the devil's work*, my mother said later, but she said it with a hint of pride. *She wanted you to inherit her hateful genes*.

My grandmother would pass out on the bench in her garden and I would have to wake her and help her up the stairs to bed.. Her papillon - a shrewd, clever, bitter dog - was fed on steak, and ice cream for dessert. He was the kind of dog who would growl at dogs twice his

size and then hide behind your legs. There are people like that, too. *Make no mistake*, my mother told me, *she loves that dog more than any of us*.

The medicine she took for her rheumatism gave her something resembling a whiskey breath. Or perhaps, I now think, the medicine she took for her rheumatism was whiskey. That makes more sense. I like to think that she was a secret alcoholic - it somehow explains her temper, her temperament.

We left her to die in that horrid old home with its stench of pea soup and ammonia, ancient furniture and stale clothes, vomit and flannel and felt. She should have kept her bentwood rocking chair - I can still see her sitting in it, not a big woman, but sprawled out anyway, listening to her favourite program on the radio. She used to claim she was psychic - it came with old age, she said. But she wasn't psychic at all: she outlived her original prediction by some twelve years.. She was eighty-seven when she died.

My grandfather had died just days before my eighth birthday, and I had inherited his onyx chess set, his trick ice cubes with plastic mosquitoes inside them, his whoopee cushion, his treasured collection of tin soldiers, and the rusty remains of the railroad track he had built the year my mother was born. Everyone always told me I looked like him. When I was not being told I looked like my father (and my grandmother would never tell me this - she was more likely to tell me I resembled Hitler), or my mother, or even my sister, I was told I looked like my grandfather. He was a plump man with a belly and a moustache and a dimple in his chin - 'like Kirk Douglas,' said my mother, who had inherited it from him.

Stella inherited his collection of *Ellery Queen's*, and for a couple of months she stayed up reading through the night. She had dozens of detective novels in her small room. She arranged them all alphabetically. She read three or four books a week. She had no friends, and therefore she spent all her time with books. At least this was how I justified it to myself when I

walked past her room in the afternoon and saw her reading Robert Ludlum or Frederick Forsythe or one of the books on pure mathematics she checked out of the Claremont library.

I accompanied her to the library every Wednesday afternoon, searching the far stacks for pictures of naked people and books about the war. There were signs everywhere that read NO TALKING, PLEASE, which was fine because I didn't talk even when I was supposed to. I watched Stella climb the stacks, looking for books that had 'Murder' in their title. There were hundreds of these books, and she seemed to be reading her way through them. She left her shoes beside the ladder, and you could see her bare legs when she stretched to lift a book. Under the hard green reading lamps, I examined her soft, plump, freckled face, her messy brown hair, her loose pink sweater and tracksuit pants.

The librarian was very approachable, Stella said. But you couldn't exactly ask her - *do you have any books with pictures of naked people in them?* Especially since you weren't allowed to talk. It was all very complicated. Behind us, old men read newspapers at long tables, wearing old-men shoes and old-men caps, practised in the art of saying nothing, though you could hear them turning pages, exchanging newspapers and old-men glances. With its scent of ancient books - melded like fossils to their rusted stacks - and old-men clothes, the library smelt a little like my grandfather's study.

Years later, when I was researching an article in a library in Johannesburg for the newspaper I was then writing for, I thought of Stella when I overheard a teenage boy talking to the librarian. He was tall and pale, with acne that he tried to cover by brushing his hair flat across his brow. He wore his white school shirt, and his necktie hung loose around his waist like a pajama cord. I wouldn't have even noticed him, if he didn't remind me, for some reason, of me at that age.

'Do you have any books about murder?' he was asking. 'But not like regular murder - you know, not a regular murder book. I mean, a book where someone gets their head hacked

right off. Or even has their kidneys, like, ripped out. Or gets *disembowelled*.' I liked the way he said that word, as though he had been practising it at home.

'What about *A Tale of Two Cities*?' said the librarian, who was in her early twenties though she sounded like a grandmother. Her voice was a combination of utter disinterest and total disgust - it was, in fact, the voice of any right-minded young woman in her twenties talking to a fourteen-year-old boy with spots. 'Someone gets their head chopped off in that.'

'That's a historical book, right?' He took her silence for agreement. 'I don't want a historical book. Or a fantasy book. I want a murder book, but not a regular murder book. A book where someone - '

'Gets their head hacked right off,' said the librarian impatiently. 'I'll see what I can do.'

From where I sat, struggling to finish an article that was already three days overdue, and grateful for any distractions, I remembered my sister.

After we finished at the library, Stella took me for a milkshake across the road. Here it was dark and cool, and we could see our reflections in the polished glass. The waitress - it was always the same waitress - was five feet nine (she had told us, exactly). 'That's too tall for a woman,' Stella told me on the way home. Stella was shorter than my mother, though if you asked she would say she was the exact same height. It didn't help that she never wore shoes.

Always, for some minutes after leaving the library, we said nothing to each other. We were still recovering from the ban against speech. Kids who went to school with Stella entered the coffee shop, hand in hand, or in groups of threes and fours, but she never greeted them. She sat there with her books in a neat pile on the counter - stacked, in fact, in order of what she would read first. The books all faced towards her so no one could see their titles, and she pretended to be engrossed in the book on top. *You and your computer*, said one book.

Mastering Trigonometry, said another. *Hallard Investigates: A Murder in Miami*, said yet another.

She was a great reader, but then all the women in my family were. She was meticulous, competed with a girl in her class for months on end to see who would be invited to attend the maths olympiad. Stella was not invited, and sulked for three weeks. During those three weeks she read books guaranteed to make her feel better about herself, or worse, I wasn't quite sure. In any event the books were *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* and *The Bell Jar*. She sat there reading, sulking, her eyes puffy, her unbrushed hair everywhere. 'How long will she sulk for?' I asked my mother. 'Until the next maths olympiad,' she had replied. But by that time Stella had taken up French instead.

On the way home from the library, Stella made up games for us to play. She walked ahead of me, but would look back every so often, sometimes even took my hand. *Step on a crack, break your back*. Imagine, she said, eating ice cream until you exploded. But would you explode? Probably your bowels would give in long before, probably you would drown in a pool of your own excrement. Once or twice, she even told me her secrets.

She didn't have too many secrets, but she said if I told anyone she would never take me out for ice cream again. She didn't say: *I'll never speak to you again*, or *I'll kill you*, like most kids I knew would. She said something very practical, and she meant it, and I knew it. Though she told me her secrets, I never told her mine. I was secretive too.

She didn't care what she read as long as she had something to read. Sometimes late at night I could hear her walk across the hall for a glass of water. She had bad dreams, she said. This was because she watched too many movies, said my mother, who blamed everything on television. Perhaps it was because there was no television in my mother's *time* - 'and I turned out just fine.' Besides, there were more important things in life than television, she always said.

'Like what?' Stella demanded.

'Oh, just about everything,' my mother replied. When she didn't want to argue she ran the bathwater or the dishwater or brushed her teeth. Sometimes she did all three simultaneously.

'Name one thing,' said Stella, who liked to argue when she wasn't reading or watching television. 'Anyway,' Stella said, 'the only reason I watch television is because I *can't* sleep.'

Late at night I found her watching *Lady and the Tramp* in her pajamas, under her duvet, her soft brown hair drawn tight as a scarf around her neck. She alone in my family was freckled. The fat Italian with the moustache was playing his accordion in the restaurant and *Lady and the Tramp*, sharing spaghetti, were drawn into a kiss. Stella loved this scene, though she had seen the film a hundred times. She always watched it when she couldn't sleep.

'When I was a child we had no TV,' said Stella, who liked to pretend that she was old. Her favourite game was when I called out an ungainly number and she would shout out its square root. Nothing gave her more pleasure. She told me over and over that she knew 'everything worth knowing.' 'How many fish are there in the sea?' I would ask her, sitting up on her bed. 'Now that's not worth knowing,' came the practised reply. For a long while I believed everything she said.

She read to me from a big orange book called *Abnormal Psychology*. This was her favourite book, she said, 'or at least one of my top three.' I suspected it might also be the reason she could not sleep at night. Her two other favourite books were *Les Miserables* and *Flowers in the Attic* by Virginia Andrews. She read *Flowers in the Attic* religiously, once a year - also, *Les Miserables*, and *Animal Farm*. *Les Miserables* had the distinction of being 'the only book to ever make me cry.' She was possessive with her books, never lent them out, licked her fingers before she turned a page. This last action always mystified my mother - who,

for the record, disapproved in the strongest terms of *Flowers in the Attic*. 'I've never understand what licking and reading have to do with each other,' she would say.

Stella read Jane Austen and Agatha Christie and Katharine Mansfield's *Collected Stories*. Also, Simenon, Henry Green, Galsworthy on long, lazy Sunday afternoons. And Edgar Allan Poe - Poe was almost as important to her as *Abnormal Psychology*. Especially *The Fall of the House of Usher*, in which a young girl's brother was imprisoned in the basement. She compared this to *The Secret Garden*, 'but that's a girl's book,' she said, which meant it wasn't very good. Some afternoons I heard her reciting from her books on French. 'Les enfants vont à l'école.' 'Je vis dans une grande ville.' 'Le petit frere,' she greeted me in the morning and then slapped me upside the head. She wanted to be like Claudia Cardinale, or Claudette Colbert, or Capuchine - or maybe all three, I can't remember anymore.

She kept lists of everything: memorised symptoms of sexual diseases, the names of earthquakes and war criminals, the names of the prostitutes murdered by Jack the Ripper (in the order they were murdered - she was nothing if not precise), the names of devices and machines used for destroying cities from the air, for torturing prisoners of war until their eyes bled from inside out. All of this would have made a fine party trick, if she ever left her room.

Knouting, she would say in a high voice, and then tell me exactly what it meant. Once, when I was lying in bed, she poured a glass of water over my head and then claimed she had been experimenting with the Chinese Water Torture method. 'I'm in the very early stages,' she had said when I screamed, 'soon I'll use much larger glasses of water.'

When one of us did something wrong, my mother often said, 'you'll be *hung, drawn and quartered* if you do that again.' But Stella informed me that this was against the law. 'No one has been hung, drawn and quartered for over a hundred years,' she said, and then started

talking about Jack the Ripper again. She showed me illustrated pictures of his murders: an alley in London, coal smoke, darkness, a drop of blood gleaming on the point of a knife. I thought of that word *quartered*. Like an orange. Split in four: your head, your heart, your kidneys, and your... but I stopped myself right there.

Life had undone her, though she had no life. She was fourteen going on thirty-five. She stayed in her room reading *Seventeen* and *Photo Journal*. She wanted to be a famous photographer when she saved up enough money to buy a camera. She showed me a picture of the camera she would like to buy if she won a certain competition, which, she said, was statistically impossible to win. It was statistically impossible, but she entered anyway. The heart wanted what it wanted.

She memorised photography terms, wrote them down in a book she kept beside her bed. *Backlighting*, she wrote, *filter*, *dark room*, *zoom lens*, *impressionism*. This last word was one of her favourites and she used it often around the house. And so my mother became an 'impressionistic cook,' gym class became a 'nightmare of impressionism,' I became 'too impressionistic for my own good.' Sometimes she used *impressionism* and *schizophrenia* in the same sentence, in which case you knew it was going to be a long sentence. Other times she said nothing, gave us all the silent treatment, read books at dinner, though the only thing my mother allowed us to read at the kitchen table was the label on the bottle of tomato sauce. *Ketchup*, said my sister, who watched too much TV.

She was in the process of renouncing (her word) her South Africanness - she said she wanted to become an honorary American. She even had an honorary accent, which came in fits and sounded like a combination between John Wayne in *The Alamo* and the person who voiced Mighty Mouse on Saturday morning cartoons. *Howdee*, she would say, *how's my impressionistic brother today?* I preferred the fluency of her phoney French to the drawling, duelling, gun-toting, TV-quoting accent of my honorary American sister. It was difficult

enough when you wanted to be born into another family, but when you also wanted to be born in another country, in another body, well then things began to get complicated.

Stupid was her favourite word. Everything was *stupid* - music, boys, and, most emphatically, *society*, which just happened to be her second favourite word. Her third favourite word was *pernicious*, and after that, *egregious*. She used at least one of these words in every sentence. 'Our society is so egregious,' she would say, when she was kept after school. She checked out thick books from the school library, but used them as doorstops, or balanced them on top of her head and walked up and down the corridor mimicking what my mother had told us about deportment classes.

In her room full of books I did no reading. I lay beside her on the warm chenille bedspread. Her body was warm, too, the books were warm, everything was warm. Beside me, slowly, she wrapped her arms around my waist. Then she held me like someone in the movies, like a lover, though that was one word she never used. She read to me from James Elroy Flecker. She read: *Ye beats the bell that beats to hell, and who shall thrust ye back? / Not I.* That hard sound rang in my head for minutes afterwards. But there was only so much Flecker I could take before I longed once more to listen to *Abnormal Psychology*.

Some days she read to me from Shelley: *An old mad blind despised and dying king.* But that sentence always reminded me of my father. Even the hammering feel of the words made me think of my father in his old car, tapping out time on his knee.

We used to write stories together, or ridiculous letters to the fantastical characters we had conjured up on lonely bus rides or empty hours waiting at the old age home, and which we would slip under each other's door, sometimes in the middle of the night. *Dear Henry, I hope Aunt Matilda was not too perturbed about the operation on her nose. She really was manufacturing too much snot. With the new technology we can get the snot to a minimum. It*

was interfering with her breathing and strangers were beginning to complain. Yours ever,
Charles.

Dear Charles. I haven't seen you since you visited my estate in Versailles last spring. Shirley and the children loved your company. Thank you for the Rolls Royce - you shouldn't have. I already have seven. Still, I will give it to my son - he will enjoy it when he is old enough to drive. I far preferred the aeroplane you gave me last year, with which I have been able to fly from my villa in Italy to my penthouse apartment in Manhattan. Have you seen old Dennis? Rumour has it he is negotiating to buy the Eiffel Tower and turn it into an office complex. Best wishes, Ferdinand.

Then there were the crazy newspaper headlines: *Woman Murders Chihuahua with Stapler. Dentist Abducted by Gigantic Molar.* For some months, in odd moments and when we both had nothing better to do, Stella and I collaborated on our own detective book. This book was tentatively entitled *Inspector Benchpress Investigates*, after the eponymous character, a bespectacled, bearded man in his early forties, who smoked a pipe and wore a dinner jacket at all times. You could feel his presence in a room - he was that kind of man. He didn't swagger, in fact he walked with a limp (a hunting accident when he was a child, he refused to talk of it), and always wore felt slippers, no matter where he went. He was cranky, believed in nothing except the art of fox hunting and the unconscionable acts of humankind, but his genius was such that Scotland Yard gave him an income of seventy billion pounds a year. With the money he brought a sports car, a mansion, and a butler named Combs, who wore an eye patch and had a certain 'dark secret' in his past, the precise nature of which we never got around to deciding upon.

And Benchpress was sexy - this was the point. He was crushingly, unforgivably, mind numbingly desirable. It was not unusual for women to murder their faithful, good-natured husbands, just on the off chance that Benchpress would be sent to investigate. He only

investigated very unusual cases, of course - he didn't need the money. But then everyone in our stories was fabulously wealthy. We wouldn't even think of writing about you if you didn't have at least twelve million pounds (*not rands*, said Stella, whose contempt for her country extended to its currency) and a private jet.

Stella drew up a list of alternative titles: *The Murder in the Rude Mall*, *The Bloodbath in Bellville*, *The Massacre in Mellville*, and, my personal favourite, a sentence she had copied from a book by Conrad that she was reading in school, *The Horror, The Horror*. This seemed to encapsulate our aim in the Benchpress book - and Benchpress himself, who had conspired to join Stella and I together, often seemed more real to me than her.

Mrs Babbit stood weeping at her husband's body. He lay across the floor in a puddle of blood with a knife sticking out of a hole in his chest. 'I loved him so much,' she said, 'who could have done such a thing?' 'You must know the answer to that,' said Detective Benchpress, 'since it was precisely you who murdered your husband this afternoon.' *How did Detective Benchpress know that Mrs Babbit killed her husband?*

Answer: Mrs Babbit claimed to have been weeping all afternoon, but
Detective

Benchpress noted that the box of tissues in her bedroom was full, and there were no tissues in the wastepaper basket. Therefore, Mrs Babbit was lying and had murdered her husband.

Stella had rescued Mollie from the SPCA, and the dog was loyal to her alone. Mollie didn't trust me, probably because when I was very young I used to try and ride her like a horse. 'So lazy,' Stella had said, 'that he has to hitch a ride with the dog when he wants to go from one room in the house to another.'

She challenged my mother and I to speed-reading contests. She took pottery classes and came home with burst bowls, collapsed vases, misshapen flowerpots. She taught me how to play klabyasch, back gammon, contract bridge. In winter, we played a version of strip poker Stella had developed in which the losers had to add on layers and layers of clothing. Stella always won. Lightly, she put her cards down on the table. *Klabyasch*, she would say, and you could see the dimples in her cheeks. Or, *Royal Flush*, and she looked as imperious as the queen on the back of the pack of Bicycles. *Put your cards on the table, Mabel*, and she would cock an imaginary hat, cock an imaginary gun, blow imaginary smoke from the tip of her trigger finger. Or she leaned over like a barkeep in one of the Westerns she liked to watch. She hammered on the rickety kitchen table with both hands. The cards we had inherited from my grandfather, too. Sometimes my mother would join us, but she always forgot the rules.

Each afternoon, barefoot, in her tracksuit pants and woolen sweater, Stella played solitaire. So sad to imagine a world in which people had need to invent a game like solitaire. And yet, it seemed to be very much my world. If you spoke to her while she was playing she would tell you to shut up. If you spoke after that, she would kick you softly in the stomach, and ‘shut the door on your way out, *bozo*.’

She left notes pinned to our doors: Dear Aidan, Please Clean Up After Yourself. After this I will not ask so nicely - I will not ask at all! Dear Mother, Please Do NOT Leave Your WET DIRTY UMBRELLA IN MY DOORWAY EVER AGAIN IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIFE. LOVE STELLA, YOUR DAUGHTER.

Stella had told me that she wanted to be an accountant when she finished school. ‘I don’t want to be like Mommy, left with some low-pay job, with two children to support and no money,’ she shook her head. ‘I don’t ever want to be desperate, Aidan. I don’t want to ask anyone for money. I want to be independent.’ But she didn’t like to talk about it, and I didn’t like to ask.

I knew she would be frugal, would spend little and eat less, would live in a small apartment somewhere, alone, with her books and her films and her library card. In my mind she was always a plump girl, sitting up in bed, turning pages.

Once, when my mother was angry because an article she wrote for *Jewish Affairs* was rejected, Stella scolded her. 'You always put yourself down. And then you go and feel sorry for yourself. How do you ever expect to achieve anything if you live like that?' But this had made my mother cry. She sat there weeping, and Stella had to comfort her.

'It's true,' my mother had said, 'you're absolutely right. I'm crying because it's true.'

'The last woman in the world,' my uncle Albert had once said of my mother, 'who dries her tears with a handkerchief.' *There were no tissues in the wastepaper basket. Therefore Mrs Babbit was lying and had murdered her husband.*

Tadzio liked to fall asleep to the sound of the radio, or, better yet, the rain. Sometimes my mother came in and fed him biscuits from the bowl of her hand. Late at night he stole Mollie's food. 'A cat who thinks he's a dog,' said my sister, who didn't like cats. But he knew he wasn't a dog, and reminded the dog of this at every turn. He bolted up trees, zigzagged across the front porch, warmed his belly on the stones of the terrace in the late afternoon. He slept through the delivery trucks, the cluttered council caravans, the newspaperman pushing his bike up the hill, the pigeons that nested on the coiled girders of the telephone poles. He had worn a smooth path in the terribly tangled grass outside. When my mother wasn't looking, Tadzio glowered at Stella and I, as if to say: *She loves me most of all.*

That saturnine cat of mine, my mother sometimes quipped. She loved Tadzio, had retrieved him as a kitten from what she sniffingly referred to as a 'bad neighbourhood.' I sometimes suspected that it was the neighbourhood that had needed saving from the cat, and not the other way around. Tadzio was aggressive, picked fights with Mollie though she was

three times his size. You had to feel sorry for that heavy, lumbering, guileless dog. She seemed almost a metaphor for my sister somehow. She cowered in Stella's room, her scratched nose smarting, her tail between her legs.

'You see what *your* cat did to my dog,' Stella would say in her grown-up voice when she came to complain. She put her hands on her hips for effect. 'Mollie was just minding her own business, and he came up and attacked her. He should be arrested or *something*.' It was only in this last statement, with its tone that threatened a tantrum, that her childishness gave her away. But my mother would not listen. She took every complaint about Tadzio as a personal affront. She reacted as if someone had told her that one of her children was ugly. The cat had her tongue. She was pussy-whipped.

'Tadzio won't bother Mollie if Mollie doesn't bother him,' my mother insisted. Even I had to admit that this was completely untrue.

'You're not being *reasonable*,' and this was Stella's favourite grown-up word. 'He keeps on doing this. This is like the *third time* this month. And I've had Mollie much longer than you've had Tadzio. You should at least make him sleep outside.' Even the way she pronounced his name was rancorous.

'But your dog is so much bigger, Stella. I can't possible believe that Tadzio would...'

'But he *does*. Come look at her nose.'

'I'm not going to go all the way to your room just to look at that dog's nose. How do you know the cat did it?'

'Who else would have done it. I didn't do it. Did you do it?'

'You don't have any evidence, Stella. Now I don't want to hear any more about it, and that's that.' You had to be a mother to earn such dark respect. And yet...

'But *motttther*,' and then you knew you were in for a fight. For when Stella took so long to say my mother's name what she really seemed to be saying was: *I can't believe you*

are my mother. I am so much more sensible and intelligent than you are. I should be your mother.

When my mother didn't want to listen, she went to her room and switched on the gramophone or whistled 'Song of India' under her breath. She couldn't program a video recorder or parallel park but she was adept at fixing a gramophone and taking a Singer sewing machine apart. That year she was proofreading student essays for extra money. She advertised on bulletin boards at the university, and in the afternoons students would come over and have coffee with my mother and collect their essays. To protect her from these strange people - all of them taller than my mother - I stayed in the living room, watching. I trusted only my mother, and sometimes not even her. She had her own peculiarities - like when she invited one of her students for dinner three nights in a row, and then, for three nights after that, Stella had to babysit. Still, I could hear the hammering sound of rock music in the alley when he dropped her home. Of course Stella did not talk about it - she lay on her bed reading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and telling me to shut up and go to bed every time I came in. But I could tell she was disturbed. And that music - there was something violent about that music. That night I dreamed that those hard sounds reached out like tentacles to wrap around my mother, to smother her. *Ye beats the bell that beats to hell, and who shall thrust ye back? / Not I.* My mother, who willingly admitted that she could not understand any music composed after nineteen sixty. But after that night, when I heard the car door slam shut and the music slowly fade out into the eleven o'clock night, I never heard about that student again. A month later she stopped reading student essays altogether.

At night I would find her typing away on her Olivetti, listening to Verdi or Puccini or *Brundibar*. *Brundibar* was the worst - it was the music of a concentration camp in Theresienstadt and was full of the mangled, soul-starved voices of half-dead children who sounded as though they were singing to stave off death as they marched into the camps. And

yet the music was so utterly relentless, so horribly melodious, like an axe soaked in honey coming down over and over on a young child's head - and yet the head singing still, its mouth moving like a chicken's. And behind that head, a whole cloud of faces chanting, a choir of souls.

She liked Mahler best of all. He followed her about the house, surging and swooning, her 'reading music', she sometimes called it. Everyone read in my house - it was, quite literally, a rule of thumb. If you didn't read, my mother said, you would be deported to the house next door, where there were no books and no children, and where the residents had not received a visitor since nineteen seventy six.

Whether anyone actually lived next door was a point of contention. Stella claimed to have heard voices as recently as the evening before, but she was not to be trusted. She often took a contrary position in an argument just to irritate me. My own opinion was that a couple had certainly lived there once, but had at some time or another murdered each other, in a gruesome suicide pact. They had feasted on poison, and then retired to the basement the husband had built shortly after they finalised their plans. Thus the bodies would never be discovered, and if I was to venture across the fence, inside the house, and down the secret stairs, I would unearth their bodies, as perfectly composed as mummies, holding each other, their eyes gleaming like lovers.

Mummies. To preserve the human soul, to pass it on to another generation, to give but also to take - to give a part of yourself only to take it with you when you left at last for other worlds. My Mummy. Stella said there were no other worlds, no life after death, no God. But still, each night, year after year, I sat beside my bed and intoned, in a voice not unlike my sister's reciting her Shelley, *Please God, Please God, Please God, Please God, let her live*. As if this would destroy not only the idea of the cancer that killed my grandfather, but the very word, *cancer*, the sound harder even than Shelley's hard words. That old, mad, blind,

despised and dying thing. That killing thing. For although the content of a prayer might be faulted, the concept of prayer could not. Why else were they taught to all children everywhere? Prayer. Preserved like mummies in the souls of all, ringing out like the music of *Brundibar*. *Brundibar* - the voice of the soul crying out one last time, *soul music*. *Please God*.

And who was to say my prayer was unselfish? Certainly, it was selfish. For I wanted to keep her all to myself forever, or until I died, whichever came first. I could not live without her - I knew that much. How could I not know? So my prayers were a form of preemption, a form of prevention, an echo of Pascal's pronouncement. For if there was a God, then my mother would be safe. And if there was not, well what was there to lose? But I had invested too much in this God, and so I prayed: *Please God, let there be a God. Let my mother live forever. Let there be a God.*

Mahler or Mozart, Schubert or Schoenberg or Schuman or Chopin, my mother's music all sounded the same to me. She liked Hindemith, although she once confessed to me that 'your father wouldn't let me listen to Hindemith. It was too modern for him.' I loved that word 'modern' which seemed so out of place in a statement about classical music. It seemed such a ridiculous thing to say, like calling Shakespeare 'modern.' Stella owned a complete edition of Shakespeare's Plays which she kept on the drawer above her bed, and sometimes we would look through it, searching for words like *bloody* and *murder* and *deceit*. Bloody-minded, she liked to read out passages that would keep me up at night. Her favourite play was *Hamlet*, because she had seen the movie with Laurence Olivier and Peter Cushing, but she also liked *Macbeth* because of the scenes with the witches and Duncan's murder, which had inspired one of our Benchpress stories ('The Hound of the Basketballs'). But she never read a whole play - she was like my mother, switching from Mahler to De Bussey, depending on her mood.

So I crept into Stella's bed early on Sunday morning and she read to me in a cool and quavering voice. *Good wombs have borne bad sons*, she read, and her fingers quivered at the knuckle as she turned the page. She put her saliva-slick finger against my brow and felt my thighs against her when I squirmed. In her warm blue terrycloth pajamas, her sleep-soiled cotton sheets with their embroidered teddy bears, she told me to lie back. Her voice was surprisingly soft after Miranda's violent pronouncement. Perhaps it was meant for me alone. 'Now close your eyes. And breathe normally. We can sleep for a little bit.' But even on Sunday morning, the scratchy sound of my mother's gramophone could be heard from across the hall.

Stella didn't listen to music at all, though she had tried to teach me to waltz. She didn't know how to waltz, so our 'lessons' were a case of the blind leading the blind. Quite literally, in some instances, when I closed my eyes, and my sister, leading, tipped me a little too far. Frustrated, Stella would stamp her feet, and then the gramophone would start pounding, and I would feel dizzy, as though I had been turning around in circles for hours.

My mother said that baroque music soothed her, also Karl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Glenn Gould, Glenn Miller and his big-band sound, and sometimes, just sometimes, Nat King Cole. Classical music was music for the very old and thus deeply unattractive. I made my stand early on, refusing to listen to anything that was recorded before nineteen eighty five. 'You're shutting yourself out to a whole world,' said my mother. But then this was exactly my point.

Secretly, in the late afternoon, when my mother was still at work and my sister was struggling at her higher grade mathematics workshops, I listened to Bing Crosby, or the quicksilver, midnight voice of Nina Simone. Stirred by these sounds, I drew the curtains and switched off all the lights, then lay on the floor and felt the hot licks of Miles Davis or the quivering, mood-mangled bass of Ornette Coleman playing 'Third Stream.' I would pretend I

was strapped to a sleeper on the tracks, like Jeanette McDonald in one of the silent movies I watched on television on Saturday mornings, with a train shuddering towards me in the darkness, my body writhing and trembling as my nostrils filled with smoke, the pulse of my heart amplified a thousand times, electric, so that I could no longer hear the train.

I always felt a mixture of shame and relief when my mother, arriving home mid-song, would catch the stray echoes of this secret music, and would *know*.

But she said nothing as she sat down to work, her disposable plastic glasses on a string round her neck, the hammering sound of her typewriter - not like a train at all. Then Johnny Cash would start up, his voice solemn as a foghorn: *Don't take your gun to town, son, leave your gun at home...*

My mother couldn't hold a tune. Even Mollie would scramble under Stella's bed when she heard my mother begin to - or, at least, attempt to - sing. Sometimes she pretended to be an opera singer, drew in her breath, placed a pillow under her sweater so that she looked like one of the women in a Rubens painting, and sang *dove sia* - that was the only line she knew. Or she told us the story of Carmen the cigarette girl murdered by her jealous lover. 'They were all murdered,' my mother said in her theatrical voice. 'The story is so beautiful because it is so tragic.' But when my sister asked her to explain, she couldn't.

My mother liked to think of herself as a 'cultured' person. There was snobbery in this to be sure, but then my mother was nothing if not a quiet sort of snob. Most of her friends were academics, a title which seemed to mean that they ate a lot at dinner parties and used big words. Stella and I had our own vocabulary for these people. 'Fatty,' we called one of them. Another we spoke of only as 'Consequently,' because he began each sentence with that word. He was also, according to my mother, the last man in the world who smoked a pipe. 'Which is precisely why he smokes a pipe,' said my mother. But he wasn't allowed to smoke inside, so Stella and I never found out whether he smoked a pipe at all. Consequently was a poet, who

had written three books - 'not one of which has ever been read,' said my mother, who owned signed editions of all three. He was tall and pale, with red hair and a smokers' heavy cough. He also spent most of his time on the golf course, an activity which, my mother said, 'severely compromises the possibility of him ever succeeding as a true poet.' I didn't understand what golf and poetry had to do with each other, but then, I suspected, this was my mother's point. 'Her ideas about *true* poetry are always false,' Stella said some time later. 'There's no such thing as true poetry. Think about it.'

Consequently was allergic to cats - 'also women,' said my mother, much later. One evening at dinner Consequently was rudely introduced to the cat when Tadzio decided to leap on his lap. 'Tadzio,' Consequently said, 'You know, I never liked *Death in Venice*. I thought it dull as ditch water.' Consequently was never invited back.

My mother put the same kind of emphasis on the word 'culture' as my sister put on 'responsible.' But as a teenager she had liked Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Frank Sinatra, Bill Haley and the Comets. She had listened to 'Top of the Pops' every Saturday evening at seven. 'So I would know what the girls were talking about at school on Monday morning,' she said shamefully.' She knew the songs from the old-style dance-hall musicals - shows like *Oklahoma!* and *Annie Get Your Gun*. She sang 'Maria' from *West Side Story* in a low and sultry voice, rolling her eyes, shifting her head back and forth.

When I told my mother that she was old, that her music was dated and her values extinct, she agreed in the strongest terms. 'Back in my day,' she would say when beginning a story, 'a hundred years ago.'

Stella, who never let anyone get away with anything, would reply, 'People no longer say *my day*, Ma. The very fact that you say it, proves you're ancient.'

Sometimes Stella and I ganged up against her. 'In your day there were no cars, you had to ride to school on a horse,' I would say.

My mother looked startled - for a moment, I thought she would cry. 'You're wrong,' she said, 'there were no schools back then. Everyone lived in caves. Occasionally one of the men in our cave would kill a dinosaur and there would be enough food for the week.'

My mother had been thirty-eight when she gave birth to me, which was old, I knew. They had had to cut her open - I had once seen the scars. I had turned back when I entered and found her half-dressed, but she had said *it's alright, you did this to me, I suppose*. The last, faint imprint of my old residence - like footprints stamped across a dusty floor.

'Did it hurt?'

She said she didn't remember. You weren't meant to remember the pain of childbirth, she said. 'When you have a child, your own child, your heart is so filled with joy that it can't hold anything else. Even memories of pain. You forget everything.'

I would sit beside her and she would smooth down my hair. 'You were my birthday present,' she always said, because my birthday was three weeks after hers. 'The best present I ever got.' But she was still hurting over my father - I could hear it in her voice sometimes. My father: the only person she loved more than me.

I knew that my mother had been a *looker* back in her day. I knew this because she had told me so. *Looker* was part of the old vocabulary, along with *my day*, *going steady*, *petting*, *Top of the Pops*, and *gramophone*. That my mother had been a *looker*, back when there were *lookers*, mattered to me greatly. Back then, I imagined, everyone went from one cocktail party to another, lighting each other's cigarettes and drinking champagne from tall glasses. Of course I was thinking about the films of the thirties - long before my mother was born. I was thinking in particular of Ingrid Bergman in *Intermezzo* which I had seen on television one Saturday afternoon.

I had fallen in love with Ingrid Bergman, and conjured up a parallel world in which she was still alive, had not aged at all since *Intermezzo*, and where we would marry and live

together in a mansion on the coast. Butlers would wait on us hand and foot. She would kiss me slowly, rising on her tiptoes (I was eight-years-old, but I had hardly thought this through), swooning slowly, the way people kissed in motion pictures. I would be a wealthy director, like D.W. Griffiths or Cecil B. DeMille. I would give some of my fortune to my mother, so she could quit her job and live happily with Stella. Occasionally, I would even allow them to visit Ingrid and me in one of our mansions. The chauffeur would be sent to fetch them so my mother wouldn't have to drive. I knew that when I kissed Ingrid - Mrs Kantor, I would call her, suavely, as I filled up her glass with champagne - my mother would look at the ground. She always looked at the ground when people kissed in movies. When anyone was shot in a film, my mother closed her eyes.

'It's only a movie, Ma,' my sister would remind her.

'I know, honey, but it's so real.'

'But you cry in cartoons, Ma. You do. You cry in novels and they're only books. You can't distinguish fiction from reality.' *Reality*, now there was a word as precious to my sister as *reasonable*.

'Everyone smoked in my day,' my mother would tell us. 'Except me, of course.' She had never touched a cigarette. I had seen photographs of her in her *day*, and she was skinny as Twiggy, with dark hair, her long legs bare under a miniskirt.

'Half the women in the world looked like Twiggy back then,' she said when I confronted her with the picture. 'And the other half wanted to look like Twiggy. But the only woman I wanted to look like, really, was Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.'

There was a copy of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in the study, one of those orange Penguin's that I associated with my mother's *day*. There was a picture of Hepburn on the front cover, wearing a pearl choker, dragging on a cigarette in a polished holder longer than her finger. I examined it from every angle and decided that I would have to ask Ingrid for a divorce.

Unless, of course, I could make some arrangement whereby Ingrid stayed in one mansion, and Hepburn in another, and I was married to them both. But no, I loved Hepburn now - I would be faithful to her alone.

There were hundreds of books in the study, but the ones that my mother spoke of most often was a green book called *Portrait of the artist as a young man*, a book with a black and red cover called *The Master and Margarita*, *Lord of the Rings*, which she had tried to read to me, and four books by Lawrence Durrell called *The Alexandrian Quartet*. She liked to tell me about *The Alexandrian Quartet*, but only because she assured me she couldn't tell me about *The Alexandrian Quartet*. It was scandalous, you see. She had read it when she was nineteen and it had shocked her deeply.

'It really opened my eyes,' she said over my shoulder, to my sister. 'I learnt all sorts of things I never even knew about.'

'Like what?' I asked.

'Well, *you know*.'

But I didn't know.

'*You know*,' Stella said, as if to speed things up. And then, to my mother, 'he doesn't *know*, you know. Why would he know?'

But at that moment I imagined kissing Audrey Hepburn the way Carey Grant did in the last scene of *Charade*, or throwing her over my shoulder and carrying her up the stairs like Clark Gable and Vivienne Leigh in *Gone with the Wind*, which was another book my mother sometimes spoke about. My mother spoke about Vivienne Leigh sometimes, too. She had read an article in a magazine about Leigh saying how she was a manic depressive, 'like your father.' Once, when they were shooting a film at Pinewood Studios in London, my mother said, Leigh had become psychotic and started scratching the eyes of the cameramen. Her husband, Laurence Olivier, was called in to calm her down. This got Stella's attention, after all

Olivier was her *Hamlet*. But she didn't like to hear about my father's mania, held it against my mother somehow.

'You've told us before,' Stella would say. 'Why do you need to talk about it over and over? What about Aidan, he's eight and he knows. Jesus, we all know. Do you really think he want to hear?'

But of course my mother was still in love with my father - that was the only explanation. This became apparent when she screamed at him over the phone, or when she cried because we had no money and it was all his fault. Everything was his fault - everything except us. We were her responsibility, belonged to her alone.

After a while you would forgive him almost anything - it was her who carried this weight of shame, who could not live on her own terms, did not even know what those terms were. She had no right to bring children into this world, when she was, in so many ways, still a child.

'But then after Leigh, Olivier went off and married that Joan Plowright,' my mother said. It was difficult to know which she did with more enthusiasm - read the gossip pages of magazines, or deny reading them. 'God knows why. She was so ugly. I think he needed stability after Leigh, but still a man needs a beautiful woman.'

I knew this last sentence would irritate Stella. But she had given up trying to talk sense into my mother.

The only person who read as much as my sister was my father, and he didn't read novels at all. He only read nonfiction - books on medicine, philosophy, popular science and genetics.

'When I met your father he was very much an intellectual,' my mother said approvingly. Perhaps she meant to imply that ever since he lost my mother, he lost whatever intellectual ability he had, too. My father was living with another woman then, whom my

mother described as being 'common.' When she thought I wasn't listening, she called her other names.

'He was well-read, but also well-rounded,' my mother said.

'That means he was fat,' said Stella.

'It means nothing of the sort. In fact the reason I was first attracted to your father was because he was, well, quite dashing.'

'He was *dashing*, and you were a *looker*,' said Stella, not unkindly.

'Quite frankly, yes.' At moments like these you could tell how much she had loved him, how much she loved him still. And then she told us the story of how they met.

'I met him at this dance your father's cousin Mona Feldman had invited me to. I knew Mona from my Sociology class and I used to give her a lift home in the afternoon. Anyway, we get there - it was in the old scout hall in Pinelands - and there is your father, all buckled up in his suit and very attractive. Well, I looked good too, if I may say so myself.'

But I knew all this by heart.

'He had all his hair back then, and was tall, or seemed tall, no, he *was* tall. He didn't walk all slumped and bent-over then. And yes, he was handsome, not that that mattered, although it does matter at dances, you know, I mean it really does.

'Anyway, he came up to me and said: *Would you like to dance?* So we started dancing. I was wearing this blue cotton dress - it was summer - very short, just longer than a miniskirt. I brought it from Stuttaford's, and it was only the second time I had ever worn it. In fact there was another girl wearing that same dress when I arrived, and she gave me this look, I thought she was going to claw my eyes out. But I didn't know who she was, and I didn't see her again that night. Perhaps she jumped in her car and drove home when she saw how good I looked. Where was I?'

'Daddy asked you to dance.'

'Right, so we went out on to the floor and he sort of just put his arms around my waist and then took them away - really nervous, you would have thought he had never danced before - and then he put them back around my waist. And then - and this is the really interesting part - he stopped all of a sudden, just turned around and walked away, really upset, and I said *what's wrong?* and he said *You know, I can't really dance.* And then I said: *What do you mean you can't really dance? Either you can or you can't.* Of course I was a very good dancer. And he looked flushed, but also rather excited - well, I shouldn't tell you - and said he couldn't dance at all. *Well, then,* I said, *why did you ask me to dance?*

'Because I saw you standing there, he said. But what he really wanted to tell me was how pretty I looked. And then Mona Feldman who had been watching from across the hall the whole time came over and said: *this is my second cousin, Robert. Robert, this is Ruth.* And I said: *We've already met.* But he took my hand. And then Mona asked us if we had danced. *He doesn't dance,* I said. *I don't know what he does. What do you do?* And then Mona - she was always on top of everything, she died before you were born, do you know she played Tzeitel in *Fiddler on the Roof*, though she was only half-Jewish, just like your father, and didn't really look Jewish at all, very dark and pretty - but not *very* pretty, but, you know, *pretty.* So Mona said: *Robert is a medical student, in his fourth year.* Well, after that...' but my mother trailed off.

But in my mind there were other questions - questions I could never ask. *When did you realise he was not right? Did he tell you, or did you have to find out for yourself? What happened the first time you saw him have one of his episodes?* She really called them 'episodes,' as if she was describing something on television. Looney Tunes.

And yet the story of how my mother and father met was a wasted story. The moment the marriage was over, so was the story - it became irrelevant, outdated, absurd. Like *gramophone, looker, Top of the Pops.* I remembered my grandmother walking up and down

the old age home, searching for my grandfather, though he had died ten years before. And then, I thought, What if my mother had not gone to that dance? What if she had stayed home that Saturday night? Or if my father had been on call? Or if the car that collided with Mona Feldman when she was crossing the street one afternoon, eight months pregnant and late for an appointment with her doctor, had run her over just five years earlier. Take away Mona Feldman, take away the blue dress, the scout hall, the dancing and flirting. Take away my mother and father, and then what became of me?

Perhaps my soul would be transplanted, like a heart, into another child in another family, and that child would be happy with his life. But I wouldn't recognise that child, would have nothing to say to him, would pass him in the corridors at school. Probably he would laugh at me, point at me, shake his finger at me and say, *Where did he come from?* My own soul turning its back on me.

She loved to talk, but there were some things she would not talk about. And she was not adverse to punishing me, either, when I disobeyed her. Once I called her a liar and she reached out and slapped me across the face. She never spoke of it again, and I never asked.

One night, when she forbade me from staying up late, I had said to her, 'I wish I was born into another family.' But this was not far enough. 'I wish I was never born at all.' She turned to examine me, closely, so that I had to look away.

'They cut me open for you,' she said. 'I almost died. Why did you wait so long to tell me you didn't want to be born? If you had said something right at the beginning, maybe I could have exchanged you or sent you back.'

If everyone had a private language than my mother spoke Denial, or *Ruthish*. Years ago Stella and I had given a name to her quirks: *Ruthish*. Of course this was a complacent and cheeky way to refer to her name which was forbidden us. I remember once being slapped

lightly because I called her to the phone by name. As if I was using the incorrect currency. *Mommy* was the word. She would hear only this from us.

She had, what she called, *selective hearing*. Of course I had that too - it ran in the family, the selective hearing and the lousy sense of direction, and the dogged sense of how things ought to be. We were infuriating partners, us Kantors. Awful to be around, awful still to leave.

In my mind I connected my father's mania to my birth. It was all my fault. The tumult of my birth had brought on his own hysteria. He refused to share me with my mother. And so he said, in effect, *You must choose one of us*. And she chose.

I'm sorry about your father. He's sick, you know. Don't hate him - I mean, don't blame him.

I had not yet finished my homework. It was too late now - my mother would have to write me a note. I imagined what this note might say: *Dear Miss Adler, Aidan was not able to finish his homework last night due to the fact that his father had one of his 'episodes.'* It was one of my great fears that the truth about my home life was only too apparent by the way I dressed, the things I said or could not say in class, the long walks I took when everyone else was playing soccer or hopscotch in the yard. More than anything, I feared that my classmates looked at me with pity, that they knew (how could they not know?) that I was different and therefore inferior, insignificant, of no use at all. But everyone had a use, and perhaps mine was so that other children could look at me, could measure themselves against me, could say: *You see that boy, compared to him I am a normal, acceptable boy. Thank God for that boy.* And because they had to thank me, and because the burden of that thanks was so great (or so I reasoned), they cursed me, belittled me, told me over and over how inferior I was.

And still I struggled to pretend that my parents were happily married, that we were sturdy and wealthy and sane. In the morning, before I dressed for school, I practised smiling in

front of the bathroom mirror. My mother had told me that I did not know how to smile - she said she blamed herself for this. 'When you were a baby you smiled all the time,' she said on the way to school. 'And then your father left, and you stopped. You just stopped smiling.' I blamed my father for this - added it to my catalogue of complaints. He had left my mother in the height of his mania and taken with him, along with his medical textbooks and sport jackets and prints from the British museum, my three-year-old smile. And ever since, I thought, he wanted to get at the rest of me - for what use was a smile without a face to hang it on?

I told the other children at school that my mother had another car, not the ancient Datsun that packed up every winter, that I had to ask people in the street to help me push. 'Then why does your mother always come to fetch you in the same car?' my classmates demanded. They were smart, but I was smarter - if I could not learn how to smile, I would learn how to lie. I would *make up stories*. Years later, when my mother told me about my father's mania, she would always add, in the same resigned tone she used to tell me about my stolen smile, *and he used to make up stories when he was high. He couldn't help himself.*

'The other car,' I replied to all who would listen, 'is very, very expensive. It's the only one in the country.' 'Is it from Germany?' said someone else who was showing off. 'Yes,' I said, grateful for the assistance, 'it's from Germany. And it's expensive. It's so expensive that when they shipped it over, three guards were shipped with it, to watch it the whole time.' 'What happened to the guards?' 'They work for my father now, in his factory.' 'What does your father do?' 'He owns the largest toy company in the world.' When you made such grand statements, people were unlikely to doubt you. My mother's car, I informed them, was massive, could fit twenty full-grown men, had a television inside it, a swimming pool in its trunk, an escalator to take you from the front seat to the back. This car was so long and sleek that if my mother even dared to take me to school in it there would be a terrible accident because every other car would stop in its tracks.

As for my house, it wasn't my only house. We had others - twenty others, thirty sometimes, depending on who I was talking to.

'But I've been to your house,' someone said, 'and it's *small*.'

This hurt me, but I went on anyway.

'It's only half of our house,' I said, 'the other half is underground. There's a tunnel.'

And then, in a whisper, 'so they can't bomb us if there's another war.'

I had been reading *The Children's Encyclopaedia*, especially the pages about the first World War, the soldiers in trenches, the black and white photographs, older even than the photographs of my parents at their wedding, the hard poetry of words like *mustard gas*, *butcher*, *slaughter*, *ammunition*. During class I drew pictures of fighter planes and soldiers carrying their severed heads, like helmets, under their arms. In the afternoons I arranged my plastic soldiers in the gutter behind the avocado tree, and then rolled a single marble - a *oner*, worth less than a cent - and watched them collapse like dominoes.

Not only that, I was writing a story about a boy, Sebastian, who had seen his father murdered in the war, and kept a teaspoon of his blood in a flask beside his bed. That was the crucial sentence - *a teaspoon of his blood* - I read it over and over.

The story was five handwritten pages, but it felt like a novel when I carried it to school. I read out from it in front of the class, but Miss Adler asked me to stop, one of the girls in the front row was weeping, was cowering behind her desk. I was exhilarated - I had never felt such power. To think I had made someone weep (granted only a girl, but it was a start - to make a boy weep, now that was an achievement) - and from a story I had written all at once sitting up in bed at night.

'It's very good,' Miss Adler said, 'but I think you should stop there.'

I had just finished the sentence about the teaspoon full of blood and was leading up to my favourite part, in which while Sebastian kneels beside his bed in prayer, his mother (herself

blind in one eye, her left leg lost to a mortar shell) enters his room and says, glowing with pride, 'What a grand young man you are. Just like your dear old Dad.'

The story was based on the British adventure stories I took out of the library - *Biggles* and *Billy Bunting* and the *Eagle annual* - though I had added into the mix something borrowed from the horror comics I smuggled home from school. There was something soothing about the vocabulary in these stories, people calling each other 'Mum' and 'Dad', while men exploded in trenches and houses collapsed into flame. There was no flask of blood in my house, no mustard gas, no Sopwith Camel with its Vickers machine gun, but neither was there a luxury German car complete with a swimming pool, or an underground house whose inhabitants would be safe even after every one else had been killed in the war.

Miss Adler called my mother in. 'He makes up stories,' she said. It shamed me that my mother had to suffer the humiliation of being called in by my teacher, that I had failed her in this way.

'What kind of stories?'

'All kinds,' Miss Adler.

So my mother knew of my secret life and thus it was no longer mine to pursue. I had to stop lying - to her, most of all.

There was no respect in coming from madness - it was a mark of shame, even then. The children at school could smell difference on you: if you wore the wrong shoes, or a cheap shirt, or had holes in your socks, or if your hair was too short or too long, or if you looked bedraggled, or if your mother fetched you from school in a cheap car, or if you mumbled when they asked you why your father never came to school, why you never mentioned him at all. Was he *dead*? Yes, better to say he was dead. At least then they would bow their heads in pity, say nothing more, look at you with shame, but no more shame than if you said *divorced*, or *manic depressive* (a mysterious word, but no less terrible for being so), hard words all of

them, mentioned in the corridors in whispers, passed from child to child. Better to close the matter off like a casket, better to bury it in lies. There was a skipping rope song they girls used to sing at lunch, tripping over themselves, in their white knee socks and burgundy jackets. I sat alone with my lunch and watched them. *Shame, shame, everyone knows your name.* It was said over and over, a mantra. For if everyone knew your name, your name was worth nothing, you were worth nothing. Shame became your name; you could not be distinguished from that shame. Just the way when my mother saw a woman and her child at the supermarket she might say, *There goes Mrs Robins and little Lisa*, I imagined people seeing me at school and thinking, *There's Aidan, and look how he carries his Shame!* And someone else might reply: *Yes, I see, but which is which?* There was another chant, a chant that only I knew, that I admitted only to myself, to my secret heart, in which my mother and I lived alone. *Your father is mad, and your mother's so glad / because now she can have you all to herself / all to herself, all to herself / now she can have you all to herself.* I had not yet finished my homework. It was too late now - my mother would have to write me a note. I imagined what this note might say: *Dear Miss Adler, Aidan was not able to finish his work last night due to the fact that his father had one of his 'episodes.'* It was one of my great fears that the truth about my home life was only too apparent by the way I dressed, the things I said or could not say in class, the long walks I took when everyone else was playing soccer or hopscotch on the lawn. More than anything, I feared that my classmates looked at me with pity, that they knew (how could they not know?) that I was different and therefore inferior, insignificant, of no use at all. But everyone had a use, and perhaps mine was so that other children could look at me, could measure themselves against me, could say: *You see that boy, compared to him I am a normal, acceptable boy. Thank God for that boy.* And because they had to thank me, and because the burden of that thanks was so great (or so I reasoned), they cursed me, belittled me, told me over and over how inferior I was.

And still I struggled to pretend that my parents were happily married, that we were sturdy and wealthy and sane. In the morning, before I dressed for school, I practised smiling in front of the bathroom mirror. My mother had told me that I did not know how to smile - she said she blamed herself for this. 'When you were a baby you smiled all the time,' she said, on the way to school. 'And then your father left, and you stopped. You just stopped smiling.' I blamed my father for this - added it to my catalogue of complaints. He had left my mother in the height of his mania and taken with him, along with his medical textbooks and suits and sport jackets and prints from the British museum, my three-year-old smile. And ever since, I thought, he wanted to get at the rest of me - for what use was a smile without a face to hang it on?

I could hear the clatter of windchimes in the yard next door - for a moment, I thought it was the telephone. The tabby next door liked to sit in the bowl of the empty birdbath and scratch at the chimes with his paws. The occasional music pleased him. From far off, as if in a different city, I could hear the switch yards shuddering in the darkness, the hard sound suspiring through the wall of night. And then, the roll-call of cicada. Because I usually slept through these sounds, and was therefore deprived of them, my ears seemed especially attuned. Across the country, I thought darkly, children my age were tucked up in bed, innocent of everything, their parents making love-sounds in the rooms next door. Across the street, a single bird, young from the sound of it, broadcast its complaint. The sound stretched taut as a telephone wire. What it was saying, I thought, was this: *I won't go to sleep, Mother. No, I won't. It's too early to sleep, Mother. I want to stay up with you.* And what answer from the mother? Silence, or perhaps a sound that could not be detected by the human ear: solace and slow comfort, the judgement and sentence of love (a sentence, yes, in any language).

I followed my mother into the lounge. Tazio was curled up on his favourite chair, his long tail flickering like a horse's. The lights of passing cars looped against the glass. From the oak across the road, an owl could be heard, its sound round as a headlight. Mollie yelped in her sleep - she suffered bad dreams, my sister said. A dog's bark scraped the night clean as a plate.

The windchimes rattled again, and then I heard a lock shake, felt the hard sound of the deadbolt, metal against metal. The front door moved closer to us - it sounded as if someone was throwing their heavy body against the door. My mother peeled back the curtain and we looked outside.

The front yard was empty. A sparrow hovered in the air for a movement like the echo of a young girls' laugh. From across the street, a trash can fell over and a woman shouted something. Then a telephone rang and someone said *No, it's not too late, in fact I was just about to call you...*

'There's no one there,' my mother said, drawing the blinds.

'But I heard something.'

'So did I.'

I looked out again and there was nothing but a soft noise, like the wind, only there was no wind. The pine that faced onto my window was shaking and there was a man struggling with its thin branches, his trousers barely visible in the dark, his body shuffling softly, tapping at the glass.

Without leaving the window, I gestured to my mother.

'There's a man out there.' Her voice was calm, as though she had expected to find someone climbing the tree outside my room this late at night. 'Go to your room, Aidan. But first bring me the torch from the drawer over there.'

It was only then that I noticed her hands were shaking.

I was trembling, but I found the torch amongst the old newspapers my mother kept forgetting to scrap, boxes of matches, and photograph's from my sister's last birthday.

I could hear her unzip the torch from its plastic cover. 'Now go to your room.'

I took three steps down the corridor, and then turned so that I could watch her shine the light into the yard. But all I saw was the torch light shuddering in the dark yard, and then I heard my mother scream as the man disentangled himself from the tree. He was standing there now, his hands in his pockets, his white hair slicked back with water, his ruddy, thick pink face dark around the eyes. It was my father.

'What the hell are you doing here, Robert?'

He shifted from one leg to another. *Unbalanced*, that was the word. He was performing an unbalancing act, his legs shaking like mine, moving towards my mother, opening his hands. You could see he wasn't well by the crooked angle he was standing, his leg slightly back as if he needed to pee. Scratching at his face until it bled.

'Let me in, Ruth,' he said. 'I want to see my son. You hear me? Aidan? Aidan, are you there?' He stopped for a moment, as though listening for an answer. 'I know you're there, Aidan. I can hear you, Aidan. Let me in. Let your father in, Aidan.'

I hid behind my mother's legs. It was dark here and I could hear the grandfather clock strike ten, the hand pulsing slowly like a hammer when it sounded the hour.

'He's in bed,' my mother said, 'Where do you think he would be? It's ten o'clock and he's asleep. Go home, Robert. You're high.'

'Jesus Christ, Ruth, don't lie to me. I know he's there, Ruth. I saw him for Christ sake. Just let me, alright, Jesus, I'm not asking for anything. I want to talk to him. He's my son too.'

'Under no circumstances am I letting you in, Robert. I don't care what you say. You can

just get in your car and go back home. I'm not telling you again. Go home and go to bed.

When was the last time you slept?'

I saw his face up close as he hammered at the glass, the hard, heavy mouth, the worn-in skin. You could tell from his eyes that he hadn't slept for days.

'Do you want me to count to ten, Robert? This is the last time I'm going to tell you - go home or I'll call the police.'

'How are you going to call the police? Ruth. How the hell are you going to call the police? Your goddam phone is off the hook.'

And then, so only I could hear, 'I thought I told you to go to your room. Now *go*.'

But I did not move. I was thinking of the story of the Three Little Pigs. The wolf stood at the door, hammering, screaming, breathing fire. Nothing could keep him out - not straw or wood or grass. *I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down*, he said, over and over. I thought of a newspaper headline I had seen: *Mother, three children, attacked at home*. Strange the order of that sentence, the mother first, ordering, providing, protecting, one could almost imagine her standing in her children's way - one behind her skirt, one under her arm, the other behind her back - as the men surrounded her, held a knife to her throat, pulled open her skirt, did whatever they had come to do. *Women and children first*. But it wasn't the word *mother*, or even *three children*, that shocked me about that headline. It was that one word: *home*. If this woman and her three children had stepped outside, onto the streets which belonged to no one, it would have been perfectly acceptable for them to be harmed. But to be attacked at home, home which had been built for children to sleep inside, to be put to bed, buried beneath piles of sheets, to curl up beside their mother, lay their warm ears on her pregnant stomach (for perhaps inside her belly another child was at home) - was too awful to even think about. I thought of my house that I loved - more than anything, more

than my mother, even. *Homeless*. Like being motherless, like being an orphan to the world. The way one imagined all beggars were orphans, came from nowhere.

'I'm going around the back,' my father said.

We both realised it at the same time. The back door was open - my mother always forgot to lock it when she let the dog out late at night.

'Don't you dare go round.'

But it was too late

I ran to my room, slipping over the carpet, tripping on the dog which had heard my mother's screams, but the porch door swung open and he grabbed me and held me by the neck. I squirmed in his hands like a fish. He had a musty, filthy smell, stale sweat, stale clothes, three-day-old underwear and aftershave. I could barely breathe, my feet in the air, my body lithe, alive. The cat ran for the door, its claws scampering on the hard wood.

She stood there now, staring at us.

'Let him go,' she said. 'Jesus Christ, Robert, let him go. I'll call the police.' She took a step toward us and he took a step back.

'You should have let me in,' he said. 'You should never have hung up the phone. I just wanted to talk to him. I just wanted to ask him to forgive me for shouting at him on the phone. That's why I came here. That's all I want - to ask him to forgive me. Go away and let me talk to him alone. Then I'll go. I swear to God, I'll go then.'

He was speaking so fast you could barely make out the words.

'I'm his mother,' my mother said. 'If you think for one moment that I would leave him alone with a madman, well then you're higher than I thought. Now put my son down and then get back in your car and go home. Right now. I know you're high, I know you don't know what you're doing, but I'm not well right now either and if you harm my son, I swear to God... Look at him. *Look* at your son. He's screaming.'

But I can't remember screaming or even how it felt in his arms. Perhaps it never happened at all. Perhaps in a fit of madness I imagined all this. *He used to make up stories when he was high. He couldn't help himself.*

'I'm sorry,' he said to me under his breath. 'That's all I wanted to say. That's why I came here.'

'Let go of him, Robert.'

'Go to hell. You've been telling him about me, I know you have. That's why this boy doesn't look at me right.'

'He can't look at you right. I can't look at you right. Why don't you look at yourself?'

Now, when she was protecting me, I could see how small and delicate she was. How could she protect me? It was I who should protect her. I was the man in the house, as I had been told over and over. I had to protect my mother and my sister. But how? With what equipment?

'I have to get you away from your mother before she poisons you.' He was talking to her now. 'Before she makes you hate me. That's what she wants. That's what you want, you stupid bitch. But I'm his father, too.'

'You're no one's father when you're like this. I'd be too ashamed to even admit you were the father of my children right now.'

I could see our reflection in the mirror, my pale face red and creased like an old person's, his hands around my neck.

'I'm about to beat you,' he said to her, 'and I should tell you now that I'm in the mood to draw blood.'

I tried to kick him with my feet, but he held me tight.

'But then you'd have to apologise to him all over again,' she said coolly.

'Oh, I wouldn't apologise to him,' he said, smoothing my hair the way she had done earlier that night, 'he would thank me for beating you.'

She pushed him then but he reached out and hit her hard across the face. *Through the face*, in my childhood vocabulary, and in a sense this is a more accurate way of describing how it feels. The hand striking, tearing, ripping through the fabric of skin.

He made his fist into a ball, but my mother grabbed my other arm, pulling me to her side. They were both pulling me. This was a game they played. The one pulled one half of me and the other pulled the other half and I was split in two and half of me went to live with my father and the other half with my mother. And everyone was happy, except half of me, or both of me, or no one at all. But my mother had pulled me to save me. *He doesn't want to go with you, goddam you. Can't you see how he's screaming. Jesus Christ. Leave him alone.*

Only my sister saved me. She was standing there in her pajamas, her dark hair cool across her brow, her hands over the hips she did not yet have. We all looked at her then, my father high and off his rocker, my mother not sober, either. I trusted no one in that moment.

'Grab me if you have to,' she said, 'but he's only eight years old.'

He looked from my mother to my sister. She was addressing my mother now. She loved my father, I now think, more than he deserved. She thought she was his favourite - he told each of us what we wanted to hear.

My father released me. He stood back, wiped his hands on his slacks.

'Get out of my house,' my mother said softly, coldly. She could have been talking to me. 'I'm going to count to ten.' This was a game she played with me when I wouldn't go to bed.

'I just wanted to spend time with him,' he said. 'To say sorry for...'

'For trying to say sorry. Not when you're like this. If I had my way you would never see either of them again. One. Two. Three. Four.'

But this was too much. I ran into Stella's arms. She held me, darkly, in her dark arms.

'But I'm their father.' He sounded like a child.

'I wish you weren't. Five. Six. Seven. Eight.'

'I'll go with him,' my sister said.

She wanted to mediate, to calm him down.

'You stay with Aidan and I'll go with Daddy.'

'You'll stay with me,' my mother said. 'I have custody of you. You'll go nowhere. You'll go back to bed. Both of you,' she looked at me now, 'will go right to bed this instant.'

Once I watched him sink his teeth into my mother's wrist. From the way she flinched and turned away, I knew he had done it before. *He was high a kite*, she said afterwards. *If you had a string you could let him loose and watch him circle the sky like a hot air balloon. If I had a string I would tie him up and beat him within an inch of his life*, I thought years later. I liked the sound of this: *within an inch of his life*. My life. My father's son.

Three

My mother edits educational books and my father is a doctor in Sydney. Two lies: one for each parent.

'So you never see your father?'

'Never.'

It was cold now, and I helped Stacy into her blazer. My hands were shaking like a drunk's.

'When was the last time you saw him?'

'Ten years ago.'

'Really?' She sounded horrified. 'And he doesn't phone you or anything?'

Her pity excited me. I wanted her to pity me further.

'He doesn't phone, he doesn't write. You know, if he walked past right now I wouldn't even know who he was. He could drive past in a big car, or he could be some tramp lying in a gutter somewhere, or he could be dead. I wouldn't even know.'

Another lie. Until the day he read my letter, I had seen my father every Thursday afternoon. He came after five, on his way home from work, in his Toyota Corolla with its beaten front fender, still dressed in his white coat, his white hair brushed backwards to cover his bald spot, his crown freckled like his hands. He would sit in his car for some minutes when he arrived, listening to the radio or reading the weekly circular sent out by his department. Twice a week, my father lectured in the medical department of the university. He was no longer allowed to work in private practise.

It was different before Stella left, but afterwards it was intolerable to be alone with him in the damp, small, stuffy car. He always asked the same questions, told the same jokes. He always hooted, because he didn't like to ring the front door. He was afraid of the dog, he said. But this was an excuse. The truth was he didn't want to see my mother. He hardly telephoned anymore. If he wanted to call me, he would call before four, when my mother was still at work. Or he would ring three times and then hang up so my mother wouldn't answer. It was a far cry from the days when he would ring every half an hour in tears.

When he hooted, he hoooooted. I would wait as long as possible before going out to him. He had to be home in time for dinner with the woman he called his 'wife,' so the longer I took to walk to his car, meant the less time we would have together. He had been living with this woman for the last five years, though he never spoke about her. I had never seen her, though I had heard her voice once on the phone. Her voice was softer than I had expected.

My boy, he always called me. Nothing ever changed. Every Thursday was exactly the same in his car. He would touch my knee. Up close, his face was ruddy, his nose heavy, porous, his brow creased. His car smelt like an old bookstore. *How are you, my boy?*

To punish him, I restricted my answers to *yes* and *no*. Whether he understood that he was being punished or merely mistook me for being shy, I do not know. It was easier for him: he was allowed to come late and leave early, return to his wife whose name he never mentioned in my presence. He told me nothing about himself. If you asked him a question - *How was work? How are you?* - he would dismiss it exactly the way I dismissed his questions. *Fine*, he would say, and then he would tell me a joke or speak in one of the accents I had loved as a child. He put on a Scotch brogue and purred, or imitated Peter Sellers imitating an Indian.

Every second Thursday he drove me to the park. Here it was damp and cool, and children sat on steel benches, watching the soft breeze stir the river water, the ducks gliding

past in wider and wider circles. A mallard, his feathers the colour of stripped pine, stood on one leg on an oak branch bent like a traffic light. Then, suddenly, it swept across the river so swiftly that its shadow only appeared some time later, like thunder. A pigeon, the veins in its neck as translucent as the filaments in a lightbulb, cocked and curved its head as far as it would go, sniffed at the air. You could hear the slow traffic of ibis, the soft scrape of leaves tearing from the beeches as the blue jays settled for the night, the sound of a child coaxing his echo across the pond. Unsatisfied with the dull sound, the child decided to scream at the birds. He chased three ducks and one sparrow so narrow it could fit on the bridge of your nose.

Dusk settled slowly over the rooftops of the city, the horizon darkening into rose and peach, burnt orange, violet,, and then darkness, solace, sleep. My father and I sat on a bench facing the street so he could watch his car, and said nothing, and then walked once around the park, and said nothing, and then he drove me home and said goodbye. These were the rituals of my Thursday-father. My sober father, going about his complacent other life.

Then, one afternoon I said, 'Why do we always have to go to the park? Isn't there some place else we could go?'

This disturbed him. 'You don't like the park?'

'I'm tired of the park. We always go there and it never changes.'

'We could go to another park.'

'We don't have to go to the park at all. We could go...,' I was about to suggest the movies but the thought of sitting next to my father for two hours in the darkness, and possibly (let's face it) seeing someone I knew, was too terrible to bear.

'The park is fine,' I said.

'You liked the park as a child.'

'I *was* a child,' but I had placed too much stress on that word.

God, I always hated that park - hated my father. Hated even his Toyota - 'the poor man's Mercedes,' Stella had called it. He was piddling and obsessive, but he did not care about the state of his car. The chrome gleamed. There were deep scratches on the bonnet, the fender was bent from a run-in with a learner driver three years before. He was too cheap to get it fixed. No doubt he would blame it all on someone else. Though he ran every evening after dinner, his face was heavy and slack, and he moved slowly, drove slowly, his head slumped above the wheel

Sometimes, before Stella left, he drove us to the deli on Rosemund Avenue and brought us chocolates or soft drinks - *cooldrinks*, we called them. We were allowed one item each, and if it was too expensive we had to take it back while he waited in the car. Stella always hoarded her chocolates - she kept them for months at a time. And she knew exactly how many she had. I ate mine as soon as I got them.

Always the same questions: *How are you? How is school? Do you have a girlfriend?* 'Eight years at medical school,' my mother would say, 'and he can't change a tire or look at himself while he shaves.' But it was difficult to know who to blame: my father for being so helpless, or my mother for marrying him.

At six o'clock he switched on the radio to listen to the news. The radio crackled - it too was old. After a minute he turned it off. He only wanted the headlines. He was too cheap to buy the evening newspaper, he read the front page at the counter of the deli while we waited for him to pay.

One afternoon instead of taking me to the park he drove all the way into town. Stella was at her advanced math class, and I was alone with him in the car. I was ten. He was whistling, smiling, combing back his hair, fiddling with the dials on the radio. He had undone the top two buttons on his shirt, and kept turning to touch my cheek whenever he stopped the

car. *My boy*, he said over and over. I had never seen him so happy, so charming, so exorbitant and indulgent.

It was winter, and the sky was dark with rain. First he took me to Cooley's in Long Street for Coke floats. He sucked hard through the straw, the glass cooling quickly in his hands. My teeth ached from the ice cream, and I felt dizzy and numb. The big black clock on the wall said it was half past six. I imagined that my mother was cracking an egg at that exact moment, checking her watch, waiting for me to come home. But there was something delicious about making her worried, a brisk and bitter pleasure, like an ice cream headrush.

Everyone at Cooley's wore winter jackets, was buckled up in dark felt, plaid, or plastic raincoats. Teenagers sat at the counter with their ruddy faces and wet hair, leaning in to each other, whispering and shouting. The radio blared: *Baby, you can drive my car. Maybe you will be a star.* Then my father said, 'how about some hot chocolate, or a muffin?' I tried not to show my surprise.

It must have been seven, or soon after, because the waiters were packing up the chairs and clearing the counter, and shooing the street children away. After he had paid, my father said, 'how about a movie?'

But there was nothing to see at the Astoria so we hung about the lobby and he brought me a crate of popcorn with butter (which cost extra). He began to talk to the girl at the counter who was about fifteen. She had short blonde hair and a necklace of moles round her throat.

'Do you work here every day?' he asked.

'Every Wednesday,' she said. 'Is that your boy?'

'Isn't he beautiful,' my father said. 'You know, I looked just like him when I was his age. Only darker. It's amazing how genes carry on.' But he had lost her then.

He had looked nothing like me, the liar.

'And you can still manage to do your school work with this job?' He leaned forward on the counter. He had forgotten about me then. 'I bet you love seeing movies. I bet you see movies all the time now.'

'That's the funny thing,' she said, 'I loved seeing movies until I got this job and now if I see another movie I think I'll throw up.' She used the Afrikaans word for vomit, *uitbraak*.

'I felt so good today I took off work,' he told her. 'Besides, it's a beautiful day. Sure, it's winter, but it's beautiful still.'

She turned away then - perhaps she could hear something in his voice.

On the way back from the Astoria, he let me change gears. 'Next week I'll let you drive,' he said. And then, as if I had not realised it, he said, 'I was joking. It would be irresponsible of me to let you drive. I'll wait until you're at least eleven.' He laughed uproariously.

'I just don't feel like going home,' he said. 'I just woke up feeling like today would be special, and it is, right? It really is.'

He kept on talking. I looked out of the window. A truck passed with the words EAT A PEACH written across it in bright blue letters. We passed the billboards advertising hair care products and Sprite, past the heavy-duty lorries wavering like drunk men, past a man selling *hanepoot* grapes on the side of the road, dressed in a rain slicker with no hood. Under the bridge, two children were skating, their faces hot and wet. I opened my window and the air smelt of truck-tipped sand, diesel oil, and the smoke that billowed from the strip-malls and factories, the fast-food joints and dirty, empty late-night emporiums.

We were far out of the city now. A Pedi woman stood on the side of the road, waiting for the taxis that came at odd hours this far out. Her face was painted white, and an orange shawl was wrapped tight around her throat.

A mile further on they were building a golf course, and a canary-yellow crane turned its head to look at us. A man in blue coveralls wearing a yellow hardhat lowered himself onto the ground and then waved, or straightened his hardhat, I couldn't be sure which. Behind us, a 'mellow yellow' police van was circling slowly with its wire grids and static radio. *An orange a day keeps the blues away*, said a voice on my father's radio. At half past seven a program called 'Business Solutions' came on, and my father turned up the radio. 'Business Solutions' was hosted by Danny James who was British which meant he sounded important, only he wasn't really much better than anyone else on radio, my father said. 'I can never find the classical station,' he said, not for the first time. 'I sometimes think the only way to ever find it, is to go back a hundred years.' And then: *Do you suffer from fatigue? Are you cranky? Overweight? Now introducing the solution to all your problems...*

Next he took me to the ice skating rink in Bellville.

'I was feeling so good today I took off work,' my father told the man behind the desk.

Then he spoke to a pair of teenage girls in the cloak room, and the man behind the bar. Then he asked the coat-check girl for her telephone number. 'You must come to my house sometime, he told me. 'There's a room there full of presents for you. There's not even space for you to move there are so many presents everywhere.'

'If I felt any better, I'd run for office,' he told the woman in the complex restaurant, and the waitress who took our orders. 'Not that politics are what they should be, mind you. But I could change all that. Not that it would be easy to change a system in which the individual is subsumed beneath the superstructure of politics, of capitalism. I'm no communist, don't get me wrong. But I have an eye for injustice. I always have - I'm that kind of person. Human beings are locked out of the very system they helped to create, and occasionally, once in a hundred years, if we're lucky, someone comes along and hammers at the door of industry, of society, with his fists, with his very soul, and says: *Let me in, I am an*

individual and I want what every individual wants, rights for the individual. I'm not naive, nor would I ever go as far as Rousseau. I'd like to, don't get me wrong - I would very much like to go as far as Rousseau, but I can't, you see. I'm more in the line of Comte, or Malthus, you know, society as catastrophe. Not that you should perceive any of this negatively, although often perceiving something negatively is entirely positive, ideologically speaking . Ferenczi, for instance - Ferenczi, who we have forgotten, like we have forgotten Rousseau - stated that instinct is the opposite of rationality. Now, I don't agree with that at all. I think rationalism, however you want to spell it, developed organically from instinct - organically, but also historically. I mean to say, we think rationally because it is in our best interest to do so. This is as instinctive as anything - as running away from a lion or warming your hands beside a fire. It makes me think of Paul Valery who said *Cognition reigns, but does not rule.* Exactly. If you dismiss rationality, as Ferenczi does, you dismiss instinct alongside it, and then you are left with nothing at all. No, that is not quite true. You are left with religion. But that is another story.'

And then, as an aside, he said to me, 'I bet your mother's mad at me. Your mother's always mad at me.' This relieved me - I thought he had forgotten how late it was.

We walked past the pet shop with its display of white rabbits in the window and five almost identical puppies asleep in a basket. 'I hate dogs,' he said to me. This was the first indication of his old self. 'When I was a child in Rhodesia we had a puppy and she peed all over my bed once when I was sleeping. I've never been able to live with a dog since.'

He had forbidden my mother from keeping a dog in the house despite her protestations that every child needed a pet. Three days after my father left she went out and brought me a puppy. Two days later she got a goldfish which she put in a bowl on the desk in my room. She brought Stella a guinea pig that ended up drowning in the kitchen sink. She brought a parrot

to which she planned to teach an entire opera, but the cat from next door got a hold of him and ripped out his guts and left them lying across our kitchen floor.

He spoke all the way back home. He could not shut up. He was funny and laughed at his own jokes. He said things that were inappropriate - he spoke about sex. He turned to me and said, 'that girl at the movies has got a body I would kill for. Did you notice it? I suppose you wouldn't have. Would you have? Well, you will soon. But let me tell you, I wouldn't mind. Just ten minutes with her, dear Lord. I say dear Lord because if I could have ten minutes with her, I might believe in Him again. Did you hear that? Not you, I was talking to God.'

It was quarter past eight by the time I got back home. My mother was frantic. She came outside, walking slowly, her hands on her hips. She started screaming at my father.

'What were you thinking, Robert? I've been waiting for three hours. You could have phoned. I mean you've never...' But then her voice changed. 'You're *high*. Oh God, I don't know why I didn't - I can see it in your eyes.'

'You're wrong,' he said. 'In fact, I've never felt better.'

'That's the problem.'

'That's not a problem. Why is that problem? You want to shut me out. That's what you want. Not just that, but when I try be a good father, when I just try and provide for...'

'I'm not married to you anymore, Robert. I don't have to deal with you when you're high, or low. It's no longer my responsibility, thank God.'

'I'm not high. How can you say that? You can't deal with me happy. That's the truth. You want me miserable.'

'I want *you* miserable,' she laughed. 'Is that the truth? I always thought it was the other way around.'

He had taken himself off lithium because he said it was making him fat. Better sick than fat, my mother said.

Later that night, in bed, I could hear his car drive off. I remembered: *Next week I'll let you drive.*

After that I didn't see him for a long while.

If I ever have children of my own, I will never allow you to see them. I will tell them their grandfather is dead. Everyone owned a different language in which to love - come-cries and movements in the dark, gestures and intimations of tenderness. But there existed also a language constructed, like a furnace, to fan the flames of hate. I wanted my letter to be exquisite and precise: clean as a poem, sharp as a blade. To weigh the pain of each word in my hand (*father, children, death*), to fashion my language with a sense of burden and affliction, my emotions, at once, soothed and excited by words. To know that I could hurt through words - if nothing else, this was my gift.

I wanted to displace him, to disgrace him, to become my own man. I wanted to relieve him of his duties; to relieve me of his sins. *The sins of the father are visited upon the son.* My father himself a visitor, a white coat in a white car, tapping out time on his knee.

Either he spoke like crazy or he was silent for hours at a time. He cried when he shaved. He cried when he drove. Like a small girl he cried, like a baby. *It's a miserable world,* he told me. His hands shook. He swallowed a pill from a sweet-scented bottle warmed by his hands. Bottled water he kept in a cubby hole. The history of the world was one of mortal chaos and fear. No one knew what was happening anymore. The whole world would go crazy, or else. It was the *or else* we had to worry about. He stopped the car. He couldn't drive any longer. He was shaking. *Help me god, I'm going to die.* Like a mother rocking her baby to sleep, I spoke to him. Just days before he had been busy on half a dozen projects, none of

which would ever be completed: a book about the Jamaica Rebellion of 1808, an article about George Bernard Shaw, another book about human pigmentation, articles about amateur mathematics, philology, physiognomy, a humorous article about a posthumous conversation with Bertrand Russell. Bertrand Russell, of all people, whom he had heard speak in Oxford in nineteen eight four, he said, only the old man had actually died in nineteen seventy, I discovered later, so it was impossible unless he had imagined it, hallucinations being common currency of manic depressives. In this state he could see everything, could understand everything, inventing quotations, jumbling gossip and theory and dreams into one long line of thought - a circle, in fact, as it never ended, went round and round, spinning on its own axis, with no fixed point. *Clarity*, he shouted, waving his hands. *You think I'm crazy but I'm not. Not at all.* Then he spoke about Albert Schweitzer, Plato and the Myth of Er, Leibniz and Lenin, Konrad Lorenz, Eugene Marais' *The Soul of the White Ant* (what about the soul of Eugene Marais? my father demanded), Paul Valery, Paul Verlaine, Paul Celan, Paul Claudel, Claude Chabrol, Celine, Jean Amery, Paul Bowles, Rimbaud, Man Ray, Karl Marx, Karl Kraus, John Berger on Picasso.

Society had sanitized us, had undone us, had destroyed us in some way. We had been *raped* by culture. By government, by corporations, by television, by higher learning, by our teachers and our public servants. We had destroyed not only madness, but the idea of madness. Nineteenth century God had been replaced by Twentieth Century Fox. The idea of the individual had been sacrificed - had been burnt at the stake of the crowd. Even the soul, he said, had been branded, marked up, sold for food. We were crawling on our hands and knees looking for our souls. But what the individual learns soon enough is that dreams, self-worth, the fervour and disorder of art are worth nothing. We had hammered the self out of the equation. The human soul was as helpless as a ten-year-old child. He was deliberately not taking his drugs, he refused to take his drugs, so that he could not be colonised, be

programmed by society. Society had introduced the idea of sanity to condemn all other ideas, to confine man's thought - *a pill every day keeps the demons away*. The insane man had been shackled, had been wrestled, like Jacob's angel to the ground. *So that they can shut me up Aidan. I mean, you see what I'm saying? You do see what I'm saying right? I mean Jesus Aidan, can you not understand what's going on?*

Read Michel Foucault. Better yet, read Rousseau. Better still, don't read anything, stay up all night wandering the city, cashing cheques and buying time, talking to strange women in bars you drive past on your way to work but never think of even looking at twice - and talk. Don't stop talking. You can't afford to. Absolutely no question about it, if you stop talking for one second, you will die, just like that. You will die. You will collapse like a sack of shit. Don't think for one moment you won't for one moment you will die. I had this dream last night that Jesus walked into my office I was still in private practice and he said: *do you charge by the hour?* I swear to God. That was a joke. And he said: *Can I take off my shoes?* And I say: *What's the problem, Jesus?* And he says: *Do I have problems. You have no idea. Sometimes I feel like I have the weight of the world on my shoulders.* Jesus Aidan don't tell me you don't believe in God or he doesn't believe in you or one or the other I like your shirt because it simply isn't true I mean on the one hand we

But on the other hand? Well, don't stop talking. There is no other hand. Your hands hurt from all the talking waving gesticulating masturbating ranting foaming at the mouth legs hurt from walking screwing kicking yelling head hurts from talk mouth hurts from mouth legs feet genitals hurt like hell no sleep head rattling all night like a train write poems on old hotel stationary and can't read them next day could just as well be Chinese or Greek I'll give you my heart on a plate and won't charge you for the heart or the plate but eat good growing boy good luck slit your wrists everyone dies but talk all you want because no one wants your talk.

He had been handpicked by God to heal the sick, the rowdy, the drug-addled, the conservative, the religious, the sunken orphans of the world. At certain moments, he said, he *became* God. Or an image of God, a *reasonable facsimile*. You always knew he was off his head when he spoke about God. He said he was talking to God, or God was talking through him, as though he was God's personal telephone line. And God didn't hang up, God didn't say *He's manic* or *He's sick*, God didn't have the sense to lock him up or shock him or give him pills or do anything to help us sleep at night.

My father's father - whom I never met - was a Jewish insurance salesman and his mother was a retired Protestant schoolteacher. A dark and fearsome woman, who smoked three packs a day and died of emphysema in Harare in her sixties, she used to read to him from St John: *He is a liar, and the father of it*. I only wish my father would have remembered St Peter: *Be sober, and hope to the end*.

Some times late at night, when I woke to the telephone, and my Mickey Mouse clock with its gloved white hand was close to two, to three, to five, I knew it was him. I closed my eyes and saw vividly, precisely, the image of my mother putting down the telephone, and then taking the plug out the wall. From outside I could hear the sound of late-night cars, the low, slightly shameful yelping of a dog that no one else ever seemed to hear. I could hear my mother sitting up in bed. And then a siren - I tried to work out by the sound whether it was the ambulance or the police. I couldn't tell one from the other. Still, it was always oddly comforting to know there were others out at these strange times. No matter who was dying, or burning, there were others awake and alive - I was not alone. I would get up and tiptoe across the passage to my mother's room. She would be crying, her eyes puffy and raw.

'Why are you up so late?' she would ask, turning away from me so I couldn't see her face.

'The telephone woke me.'

But she had decided to deny it.

'What telephone?' The telephone didn't ring. You must have dreamt it. That must be it - you had a bad dream and it woke you up.'

I could see the telephone tangled up beside her, but I said nothing.

'Well then why are *you* up so late?' I asked.

She smiled. 'I was trying to read.'

It was true there was a book on her bed, but there were always books on her bed, dozens of books cluttered on her night table and lying face down on her floor.

'Come, sit,' she said.

I sat. It was warm on this large bed where my father had slept years ago. She spread the blanket over me. Her bedside lamp glowed amber as a headlight. Then she snuggled beside me. Meanwhile, in another part of the city, my father, in an ecstasy of mania, drove for miles, or went to the Night Owl Inn or the Low Key Club, one of the bars still after one. He did not drink but needed to talk. I imagine this now, years later, old enough now to be the father of that eight year old child. He sits down and orders a scotch, untouched, and begins to talk to the kind of men you find out late alone - men not unlike him, in some ways. But he cannot shut up. Soon even drunks realise he is unstable. Or, he stays at home and goes through his telephone book, phoning old girlfriends and women he once loved. Or he masturbates all night until it hurts. Or, he pulls up the chair in his room, and tries to hang himself. Or he tries to slit his wrists. Or he counts out his pills neatly, mathematically, placing them in boxes in alphabetical order in his medicine cabinet knowing full well that when the down side comes (and you never think of it when you are up, but it is there, a shadow waiting, pulsing), he can swallow them all one by one, neatly and mathematically, and then retire to his bed, neatly, slowly, softly, and wait for everything to end. Full of black bile, choking from the weight of it in his mouth - this melancholia, mania - he travels the empty city streets, reciting

Shakespeare from memory. *Unarm, Eros; the long day's task is done / and we must sleep.*

But he cannot sleep. And Eros too has been unkind: when he is mad he wants a woman, but there is nothing more unattractive to a woman than madness - real madness, I mean, frothing mouths and words with no end. Eros is sore, cannot keep up with my father, who is fencing with the Furies.

'Lie back,' my mother said, 'so you don't feel the light.'

But the light was comforting, warm like her. Then she switched it off.

'You want to know something,' she said. She spoke in her night-voice, her hush-voice, soft. 'Between you and me. A secret. In a funny way I'm glad you woke up. It's nice to have you here. You can't do it too often, you understand? You keep me company. Even when you're asleep.'

She smiled. It was dark and I was faced away from her but I could hear her smile. You had to know someone really well to hear them smile - it was like knowing what they were about to say, or what they were thinking when they didn't want to speak.

'Daddy was on the phone,' I said.

'Yes,' she said, 'Daddy was on the phone.'

One could always look forward to these telephone calls - they gave me an excuse to sleep with her.

For days at a time he could not leave his room. He medicated himself, then took himself off the drugs. He had to be coaxed out of bed in the morning, had to be coaxed from sleeping all day and reading all night, had to be coaxed into taking his medication again.

'I don't know what's got into me,' he would tell me on the phone. I was a teenager now and could tell from his voice the state he was in.

'It's okay,' I said. 'It's fine. You're fine. Nothings wrong with you. You'll be better in the morning.'

He was crying. 'I'm sorry. You're a wonderful son. I love you. You know that? You know that, right? Of course you know that I know you know but I get so confused sometimes your father isn't always aware of I mean I'm aware of but it's difficult for me Jesus you know I can't really I mean I can speak I can speak like Jesus preaching another manic perhaps but I can't make sense of what I'm saying you know what I'm saying of course you know I'm sorry I sometimes think you're better off without me.'

Strange to think that everything was chemical. Imagine moods recurring in cycles, the body abandoned, the Cartesian dialogue broken open by the dark drive of the mind. Neurons, wasted or blasted, a whole alphabet of dark words refusing like children to fit into any coherent order. Syncopated synapses, the serotonin moanin' inside you, your legs twitching like an electrified frog, your whole head rotting like a tooth. *Bevok in die kop*. A pattern that makes no sense is still a pattern, and makes sense as such. Perhaps mania has its own aesthetic. But the moment death becomes an aesthetic, art becomes an impossibility. Art, but also life - but now I sound like him.

There was a rhythm and pattern to his moods, even his telephone calls occurred over and over, and always for hours at a time. The most Romantic of diseases. And yet this was an old myth, that only artists were sick. It was society who was sick of her artists - it was the other way around. This vested interested in madness was as old as the idea of the soul - madness as meted out to those who artistically deserved to suffer, to suffer for the sake of their art - it was all nonsense. *The poets in their youth begin in gladness* - even the insanity was overrated. There were artists who did not sleep for months, who drank themselves to death, and all for what? Nothing was worth that much - not in a world where art was forgotten, in a world where the artists had to recuse themselves to madness, or poverty, or

pain. The artists had appropriated depression: taken it over, made it their own. And yet surely mania was not so aesthetically exclusive - surely plumbers and beggars and mathematicians all suffered from that same bitch goddess Miss Fortune. There was a privilege in art, but it was a sober privilege. To write great books, or burn them all.

He became a compulsive shopper. He would buy things he did not want, did not need, had never considered before. An electric toothbrush. A larvae lamp. A book entitled *Hikes around the Western Cape*. A necklace for my sister. A television for a woman he thought he was in love with - who thought he was crazy but took the television all the same. His conversations were full of jokes, codes, double meanings, double *entendres*, double negatives, rhymes, word games, anagrams, hand signals. He would often repeat himself. He wrote with ease, but little skill - a fluid, nonsensical drug-driven, mood-mangled verse.

Two weeks after my mother's death, when Stella and I had to pack up all her things, I found a pile of his manic poetry, what he called his *miserabilia*, in the basement. It was a strange moment, returning home from Johannesburg for my mother's funeral and discovering his poems in a box amongst my mother's cutlery and books. Most likely she did not know she had the poems at all. I sat there for an hour, reading. I read:

They strapped his Muse to a table,
put a bit in his mouth, took the pen
from his hand ('you might cut yourself'),
then locked his hands together and brought
him close to death.

There were two dozen of these poems, scribbled in his dark, small, cramped hand.

Again, again - you realise why they knock you out.

So that you can't write about it. Your pen is in a box
on the floor. Your belt, your knife, your shoes -

'we'll give them back to you on your way out.

Don't forget your pills, and not too many

You might trip, and we wouldn't want that.'

The chemicals in my brain are out of alignment

someone has to hammer them in.

She tore his hair out, strand by strand,

and afterwards he kissed her hand

'why thank you dear you've been so kind,

your skin is smooth as orange rind

and miles to go before you sleep,

you better start by counting sheep.'

They wake me at midnight, and march me down the hall

then lay me out on a flat steel bed, my feet against the wall.

This won't hurt, I swear to god, says God himself in his old

white coat. Close your eyes now, hold your breath. Think of

an electric storm. An eel, or a wheel, or an overnight train.

Or Nothing - think of nothing. Don't think. There is a pulse

in the dead centre of your heart. You will never be as alive

as you are now.

They strapped your muse to a table
with a fuse and a cable; your creative juices
flowing (or is that your head blown up with drugs),
your lips thick, your wrists dark with last night's blood

He suffered from one attack after another and returned each time, dulled by drugs, thick-necked, slow on his feet. *Pill-ill*, he called this state. Sadder even than mania. He wept on the phone. 'I'm sorry, Aidan. I'm a failure. I've failed in everything. I don't deserve to live. Forgive me?'

Perhaps it took one manic to forgive another.

Is there anything more human than the desire to confess? Stronger even than the desire to make love. Love itself a form of confession, a form of redemption.

Once, when he had a fit while driving us home from the park, he tried to throw me out of his car. *Leave him alone*, Stella cried. But perhaps I had been left alone too long. The two of us had to walk home.

'Don't tell Mommy,' my sister said, 'it will disturb her too much. You don't want to hurt her.'

'But he tried to...'

'I know what he tried to do. But he didn't mean it. You know that. Don't be so selfish all the time. Think how Mommy will react.'

So we kept it between us.

In my letter I said that he was dead to me, and so he became dead: he was dead and the white coat was dead and the white car - all of it was dead. But if my father was dead

surely I was dead too - the parts of me that belonged to him. My face, for instance, or my moods. These inherited insecurities.

I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. Like a child.

My mother once told me that one night she had woken to the sounds of the man next door beating his child. 'I could hear the crack of the whip,' she said, 'and in between each crack, the child was screaming and saying *I love you Daddy, I love you.* And then the whip would come down again. It was really pathetic. I almost phoned the police.'

'Then why didn't you?' I asked.

'Well, then it was over. He stopped cracking the whip and the child stopped screaming and I went back to sleep. Besides, I couldn't possibly phone the police. I like to have good relations with my neighbours.'

University of Cape Town

Four

It was ten to eight. I walked home slowly, past the library where Stella and I had gone every Monday afternoon, past the shuttered grocery, past the showrooms in darkness, past the charity bookstore and the Rocking Horse Shop. A boy passed on a bicycle, reaching out to brush with his hands the bare and brittle pines. Though we were the only two people in the street, neither of us spoke as we passed. Street lights shone crimson on the crushed leaves of oaks, the copper beeches and crooked, twisted pines.

At the corner of Thomas Avenue, where Stella and I used to go for milkshakes, and where the butchery now was, a fleet of empty buses past. One after another, they turned up the road, brightly lit and circling slowly. There was a sign up on the wall that read: CAREFUL, CHILDREN CROSSING. I would be sixteen that month.

April - my birth month.

I walked past the pharmacy with its light that shone OOP which was rude if you read it back to front, the neon shining softly on the frosted glass. I knew the pharmacy would smell of old cottonwool, moth balls and cough drops. I knew that behind the counter would be an old man on a high chair, who had always been old, even when I was very young, his head shaven clean as a bowl.

I didn't want to come home, at least not right away. I didn't want to see my mother, who would be curled up in bed with some book she had been reading for weeks - *A Dictionary of Angels* or *The Encyclopaedia of Archaeology* or something by Herman Wouk. 'You have hundreds of books,' I told her once, 'but none of them are any good.'

'I'm not an intellectual,' she would always say. 'Not like your father. I have problems with philosophy, with big ideas.'

'But you *are* cultured.' But this was a tease.

'I am cultured, that I am.'

It was different now that Stella had left. Between the two of us we made a pot of vegetable soup last three days, and my mother ate cereal in the kitchen late at night. Sometimes I would find her in the lounge, after twelve, sitting at the table, writing out a note to herself. On the bentwood chair, Tadzio slept. He was old now, slow-moving, round. He no longer caught lizards or rats or anything really. You could hear him coming a mile away. But he was still beautiful. And Mollie had long since died.

Late at night, my mother became chatty, full of gossip, wide awake. Excited as a child, she wanted to keep me awake - 'so I don't feel so lonely,' she said. So I sat up with her and spoke, sometimes for hours. I would dry the dishes while she washed. Sloppy, I wiped a spoon on my shirt. She was too busy talking to notice. And I loved her. More than anything, I loved her. I can't put that into words - that's the point, I think. I've been trying for a long time now and nothing quite works. Even Shelley, even Keats, even the writers my mother most loved, they never wrote anything which expressed exactly what you felt when you looked into the eyes of someone you knew intimately and were looked at in turn by those eyes. None of the sounds of Miles Davis meant anything compared to your mother's low, late *hush*.

Still there was a part of me that wanted to hurt her - I couldn't deny it. To belittle her, to destroy her estimation in my eyes, to lessen the weight of her love. I loved her so much it hurt sometimes. It sounds stupid to say, but love is stupid: that's the truth - love is the stupidest of all emotions, the most humourless, tragic, dumb. It didn't ask questions or answer them, it was what it was, defeating all purpose and language, you felt it deep in your gut - it

had nothing to do with the heart, it ached you until it ruined you, like a cancer, clawing deep inside.

My mother's room was a mess of books, empty coffee cups, unframed photographs, unfinished and abandoned knitting, ancient magazines (*National Geographic*, *Your Family*, *Archaeology Today*), prints from the National Gallery gathering dust. My sister's dog hid his red rubber ball under her bed and it lay there for weeks at a time. She left the windows open and papers blew into the yard. She dropped a canister of perfume in the kitchen while unpacking parcels and our house smelled like the cosmetics department of Truworth's for a month. She brought things and then forgot she had brought them and brought them again. She forgot to put up the handbrake of her Datsun and it rolled down a hill in Camps Bay. From the window of the house my uncle saw it go. *Someone's stealing your car*, she said, *and they're driving down the hill in reverse*. My mother had to run after it. She was, in her word, *scatterbrained*.

She left the gate open in the morning, forgot to lock the doors of her car. She kept losing her handbag, her house keys, her jacket and umbrella. I had to remind her of everything. I left notes on the breadboard, or pinned up on the kitchen counter. *Going to a movie after school, so will be back late. Don't panic like last time*. That was one thing about her - she always remembered to panic. Or: *Please fetch me at six, if you can. I will phone you to remind you*. PS *Remember to take your pills*.

She disapproved of all drugs, especially what she roundly condemned as 'that homeopathic nonsense.' 'Think about the terminally ill,' she would say, 'they put all their faith in something which doesn't even work.' I wasn't sure. If you were desperate you would agree to try anything - I understood that. Perhaps home remedies were merely prayers in other forms. And my mother never argued that prayers were nonsense - she never went that far.

I was a big letter-writer - I had inherited this from her. The attic in our house was full of boxes of her letters, some written to my father in the year after they started 'going steady.'

'When I was at school, it was called being cased with someone,' she told me. 'You see, boys and girls had these case bracelets, they were like those Medic Alert bracelets, really. And they had your name on it, and if you liked someone you exchanged case bracelets with them. I never had one though - I was never popular. I spent all my time reading. My friend Rosalind had a case bracelet.'

I had never heard of Rosalind. What happened to her?

'Oh, she married this big, fat, ugly accountant. She always wanted to be rich, she knew what she wanted. They're in Sydney now - like everyone else.'

'Did I ever tell you,' she would say, 'that before I married your father he considered himself a bit of a poet.'

'About a million times.'

'Well, good to know you've been counting. He didn't even read poetry, but he considered himself a poet. Except he read Keats, of course. What's it - *foster-child of silence and slow time*. He liked that.'

'So do I. Just that line, not the poem. That line always reminds me of a very small boy looking up at a very tall grandfather clock, I don't know why.'

'He wanted to be a poet,' she said again, 'like Gavin Drummond, like you.'

Gavin Drummond was Consequently's real name.

'I don't write poems,' I said. 'I read them sometimes, but I never write them. I've written one poem and I was like fourteen then.'

That poem was about my father, but I did not tell her that. Another secret. The poem went like this:

Tell me who told you your mother would hold you
Who comforted shadows: their noise on your wall.
Tell me this much if you love me at all,
You roughened the cloth on the flesh that I wore.
Father: you have no other name.

Sometimes I wrote pastiches or satires of famous poems. I wrote: *Come live with me and be my love/ and we will all the pleasures prove./ And I will sit and smoke all day,/ While you go out and earn the pay.* I was reading Robert Lowell, Auden, Pound. I wrote: *The apparition of these faces in the class/ Like tooth marks on a wet, black pen.* I wrote: *And Auden echoing dull as wood / as only Auden ever could.* I began stories that I knew I would never finish - I could never finish anything, my mother said. I wrote a poem that began *They killed a child on the overhead path last night / slit his throat with a blade fine as a twig...*

She had this idea in her head that I was a poet. I didn't want to disillusion her. Certainly, I thought, if she wanted me to be a poet, I would conscientiously try and become a plumber. That was the kind of son I was. I wrote these poems in class when I was supposed to be concentrating.

Alone, at night, I read Ovid and Plato and *The World as Will and Idea*. I was ferocious and determined. And there was a comfort in these dark books. I imagined that Heidegger had no friends at school. And Nietzsche, well he was beyond friends, beyond good and evil.

I read *The Ancient Art of War* by Sun Tzu, *The Tropic of Cancer*, and a book entitled *How to Pleasure a Woman* which I had stolen from my cousin Harold's room, and kept hidden under my bed. These were the books I did not share with Stacy. No doubt she had books which she kept secret from me. Secret books indulging secret parts of ourselves.

I read: *Man is something that is to be surpassed.* I read: *Quem di diligunt / Adulescens moritur.* He whom the gods favour dies young. I read: *Runs, she runs to meet me, a girl with gold hair on the wind.*

In *How to Pleasure a Woman*, I read in a stage of confusion and excitement: *In the heat of passion a woman's whole body is an erogenous zone. During the advanced stages of foreplay be sure to pay attention to the clitoris.* I wrote down: *erogenous, clitoris.* I wrote down: *Book says woman are excited by deep kisses and clitoral and vaginal stimulation.* I hoped it felt better than it sounded. But it was complicated and I was scared. How would I know what to do? I mean, exactly? Better to stay at home and read. These words were no sexier than *sparkplug* or *jackknife*. Strange that the names of the sexual organs were not sexy words. What was a sexy word? *Oleander, winter, mahogany, kiss.* The deeper you got into the body the grosser it began to sound: *rectum, scrotum.* It was as if they gave all the good names out first and then when it got to the lower parts of the body, no decent words were left.. *Testicles* was at least an ungainly, silly-sounding word which fit the body part perfectly. But *vagina* - what was one to make of that? I read: *There are hundreds of sexual positions, but passion is required for each.* I looked at illustrations of the 'elephant position,' and thought: *Why?* Better to read Nietzsche who despised of sex entirely, of what he called 'cupidity.' Sex, which killed him perhaps, Zarathustra foaming at the moustache toward the end, writing books that made no sense. Or Tolstoy, who vowed chastity, but was forever tied to carnality. At the age of eighty his wife Ana accused him of having an affair with a young man. And this always made me think of Thomas Aquinas: *God, make me chaste, but not just yet.* What about Heidegger - he slept with Hannah Arendt, although God knows why. Probably he was scared not to. Always, at night, I could hear my mother typing in the room next door.

She had learnt how to use the computer. She still suffered certain pains that I knew she did not talk about. She was always losing articles or forgetting to save. I knew if I came in she would look at me and I would say *what are you looking at?* and she would get upset. It was difficult being alone with her then.

'You don't love me,' she would say. That's how you make me feel. You never let me touch you. You pull up your nose at me.' That was her expression: *pull up your nose*. There was another one: *you walk around with your nose in the air, as if you're too good for me*. Strange, because it was her nose I had.

I would sit in the study and listen to her talk. She needed to hear about my day, every detail. She needed to feel involved. 'You don't talk to me anymore,' she would say. 'You just go to your room and slam the door and that's the end of that.' She was upset.

'I lay the blame at your feet,' I told her once when I was miserable.

'Well,' she said, 'then I must have enormous feet. I must have the biggest feet in the world. You know, I failed with you.'

'It's always about you. *You* failed. Well, maybe you did. Maybe the fault is all yours.'

Or, she was yelling, crying, 'I'm not allowed to scream at you, but you can scream at me. It's like there's one set of rules for you and another for the rest of the world.'

The conversation between two lovers, though she was my mother and I was her son. Not so different from two lovers in many ways: we lived together, we spoke our own language, when I was away from her I missed her and I sometimes saw her in other people, walking, crossing the street.

Anything could be forgiven if you loved someone.

'Do you hate your job?' I asked her. But she did not say *hate*, or *fuck*, or any of those words.

She needed to work, it calmed her. She lay in bed and I brought her steaming cups of coffee. She drank six or seven cups a day. I brought her oranges and tangerines and grapes. 'You treat me like a princess,' she said. Then she couldn't sleep and I could hear her at night, walking around the house. The house was small enough for us to hear every sound.. Difficult to masturbate in a place like this. Difficult not to feel guilty.

'How was school?' she would ask me.

'Good.'

'Good.'

'How are you feeling?'

'Fine,' and then she realised what I was asking. 'Better,' she would say in a low voice.

Better not to lie about it.

'I woke up yesterday and I felt better. When I feel a bit better, I'll teach you how to drive, then you can take me out to lunch one day.'

But this seemed to offer the possibility that one day I would have to care for her, do things that she would be unable to do for herself. For this reason alone it was better not to learn.

She flattered herself and I could see how sad and miserable she was. She wanted to put me on her lap again and stroke my hair - I could feel it somehow.

She bitched for hours about her boss at the Commodore Career Training Centre.

'She stinks of smoke. It's not that I disapprove of her, so much as the fact that she's awful. I mean, I can't think of anything nice to say about her. She slams doors beautifully - there, I found something nice to say. I sometimes think she's auditioning for one of those really dramatic scenes when the wife storms out of the house - you know, Kay Francis, who you wouldn't remember.'

'I remember,' I said, 'I mean, you've told me about her.'

As a child this gossip was bliss, but now it was tired, and I felt angry and sad. I had other things to do. I had outgrown her, I thought. And then I felt guilty for the thought. We were simply different people. I wished rather that she would outgrow me. I wanted her to see less and less of me, not to rely on me more and more as seemed to be the case, or to be unwavering in her affection, to still care about me, to still think I was a child. And I became a child each time she considered this - how could I not be?

Her job was taxing and she came home late and tired and angry with everyone. She had developed pains in her chest now, and was weak most of the day. But she was afraid to see a doctor, afraid of the results, but also of what might happen to her job.

I honestly considered dropping out of school and getting a job somewhere to support her. I was frugal, brought second hand books below the station, always walked when I could, sneaked onto the train, sneaked into occasional films.

I was floundering at school - but I had other things on my mind. I did well only at English. And what did I get for Science, month after month? The scrotumtightening C.

My mother had gone to meetings with my teachers, who said that I was intelligent but erratic and unfocussed, languid, indifferent, detached. There was a certain pleasure in being evaluated by words whose meanings I had to look up. Easy to say: *this is what you are*, easier still to put you in the back of the class and focus on everyone else. Then you could say *indifferent*, then you could say *detached*.

Sometimes in class, I wrote my own report cards for my teachers: *Mr. Bernard is pigheaded and stupid (who else would opt to teach gym?). My own opinion is that he became a teacher because it was the only respectable opportunity for him to be around underage girls in short skirts. Or: Mrs Colbert has all the good qualities of Hitler, and a more impressive moustache. I've finally worked out why they get her to teach Sex Education - everyone knows that the people who spend all their time talking about sex, have never*

actually done it. When she discusses fellatio, it reminds me of my Aunt Gladys talking about her haemorrhoids.

My mother always came home harried from these meetings, and looked old, and I blamed myself for aging her. I swore that I would do better from now on. 'Well your Science teacher is awful,' she would say. But she became angry. I no longer feared her as I had feared as her child, now I only feared making her miserable. She knew that she had lost this power.

I walked past the old church hall where I went for speech lessons in Standard four. In that wide airy chamber, my teacher, Miss Strathairn, listened to me enunciate. A tall, lean woman with dark black hair tied back in a bun, she tapped out my vowels on the shiny wooden floor. She had long fingers and freckled hands with deep, clear veins. She dressed in heavy navy skirts, woolen sweaters, dark silk scarves. It was as though she had lived most of her life in a colder climate. Her long smooth beautiful black hair was pinned back in a bun with a pencil. She smelled of cabbage and cigarette smoke.

I could not wait for the hour to be over so that I could take my bus back home. Miss Strathairn would kick off her shoes. She had long narrow feet, and I remember the shock to find that this unmarried, lifeless woman painted her toe nails. And such a fiery sexual red. Then I would have to recite from Milton: *Hurld headlong flaming from th' Ethereal sky*. It was always Milton, something in his verse satisfied her - death and redemption. Appropriate in this church, where, when no one was looking, I knelt beside the body of Christ, his stone hands warm in the late afternoon sun, his bloody wrists bright as candle-flame.

Sometimes she read to me from her favourite poet, George Herbert. A criminal writer - a sinner to the very end, pale was his soul, burnished. I loved the clean feel of Herbert's verse, like a blade over the cool flesh of the wrist, or a nail hammered into the arms, into the legs.

In my mother's study was a picture of Jesus by Marc Chagall, crucified while a *shtetl* burns and Jews flee, a *tallis* wrapped around his waist. I connected this picture to the stories of Kafka that my sister read, and to the music of *Brundibar*.

'Did you prepare that poem by Edith Sitwell?' said Miss Strathairn.

I read out loud:

Still falls the Rain -
Dark as the world of man, black as our loss -
Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails
Upon the Cross.

'Can you imagine *nineteen hundred and forty nails*?' Miss Strathairn would say, 'can you count that many?'

From where I sat I could hear the voices of the altar boys hurrying home. I listened to their chatter. *Meet for soccer, after? - Maybe. - Whaddya mean maybe? Maybe what? - Maybe, I'll have a funeral. - There's no funeral. I even know. Come on - now you're playing.* I longed to leave Miss Strathairn behind and join them. Would they know I was Jewish? Could they tell? I could lie about this, too. If they asked, I would say, *nineteen hundred and forty nails*. I would say, *black is our loss*.

'These issues of man's fall and our lord Christ are of the utmost importance,' Miss Strathairn was saying. 'I respect your religion, I really do. But I would hate to see you barred from the gate of heaven, Aidan. And you're young, still. Let's look at The Gospel of St. John in our remaining moments.'

If my mother knew what she was telling me she would terminate the lessons immediately. But then why give her the satisfaction?

There was something luxuriant about betraying my mother in this way. But Miss Strathairn wasn't Catholic. She told me she had prayed to God to help her quit smoking. I looked at her toe nails. She was lonely and wrote things down in a little black book. She showed it to me once. She had written *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not wander. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not wander*, over and over like a scolded child at a blackboard. *Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, bless the bed I lie upon*. And beneath this she had written, *cry upon? die upon? all three?* She had secrets of her own: she had been married once, she had lost a child.

Sketched on the wall above in gilt lettering was a quote from Saint Augustine: *let not my soul faint under Thy discipline, nor let me faint in confessing unto Thee all Thy mercies, whereby Thou hast drawn me out of all my most evil ways, that Thou might become a delight to me above all the allurements which I once pursued*. Once while I was intoning from Milton, Father Monroe entered the hall. Instead of his vestments, he wore faded blue jeans and worn suede shoes. ("That's the problem with being a priest," Miss Straithairn told me later, "if he had a wife, she'd tell him to get new shoes."). He greeted me fondly, his voice roughened from tobacco, his curly black hair cut short. He opened the large windows with the long pole with the hook on the end. Cold air blew in. His face was pockmarked from that angle. He was tall and walked with a slight limp, a relic of his past life. He had served on the border years ago. She was shy in his presence, looked away.

Once I sneaked into the empty church. Christ everywhere on the walls in stone. The candles and scent of cool air and musty old prayer books. I was shivering and scared. Face to face with Christ, I kneeled backwards. I tried to cross myself. But Father Monroe came in. *You're Jewish*, he smiled, *you shouldn't be here*.

For all Christians I had a rejoinder: *Jesus was a Jew. And I am Jewish. Accept me*. But my mother did not want to know about Jesus. *But he's Jewish*, I said, *and you're interested in*

Jews. You should be interested in Jesus. She bit her underlip. She had sent me to *cheder* once, but after three lessons I had refused to go back. Her religion meant nothing to me. I couldn't read the language. One Sunday morning, walking, I happened to enter Saint Matthew's and stood with the rest of the congregants, knelt on the blood-red mat and took Christ in my mouth, felt him in my gut, redemption and acceptance and shame all at once.

My mother would have cried if she saw what I had done. *They killed so many of us*, is what she would have said. But my father wasn't Jewish. He was an atheist - he had told me so himself.

In my house on Friday nights, my mother lit candles and there was *challah* and red wine in a decanter on the table. As a child I watched my mother do the swimming motions over the candles, close her eyes, say the soft prayer. I loved these *shabbos* meals when my family gathered together, spoke and laughed, talked about politics and books, and I was sorry when they all moved away. There was my aunt Gloria, a failed caterer, with dyed blonde hair, who dressed like a gypsy in loose sweaters, faded floral skirts, combat boots. Her husband, my uncle Albert, from the Belgian Congo, was a Western Province chess champion and chain smoker, a Holocaust survivor. 'That stinky man,' my mother called him. Table talk was delicious. There was nothing I liked better than to sit at my chair and listen to the careless arguments of the people I loved.

People raised their voices and repeated themselves. My cousin Harold, who broke his nose when someone pushed him off a bike, disappeared outside to smoke. I would sit beside him on the cold step, and he tried to explain to me how it felt to have sex. He spoke in great bursts of smoke, used his hands, swore. His hands and knees were bruised from skate boarding. *If you fuck them enough they loosen up so they want it all the time*, is what he told me once. He made his hand into a hollow. *You have to go deep as possible, like swimming*,

then keep on swimming until you can't stay underwater anymore. He laughed. He had small, tobacco-stained teeth. When I sat close enough to him I could see that he still wore a retainer on his bottom set. He was the first boy I ever knew with an earring I wondered how he had ever convinced a girl to sleep with him. Perhaps he had paid her - I knew he was not above such things. *Your sister isn't bad,* he said. But then he felt guilty: *if you tell anyone I said that, I swear to Christ I'll kill you.* But he said it gently. He put one hand on my shoulder. *Give me your word.* I gave him my word. *Good, then I'll show you something.*

From his jacket pocket he removed a pack of cards. *For Strip Poker,* he said glibly. His voice was almost sad. He showed me how he could flip through the pack, quick as a card shark. There was a picture of a naked woman bent over like a dog while a man held her breasts. *Say thank you,* he said. He had gone from one school to another. He had been kicked out of an expensive private school for breaking a bathroom window at the school fair. He snuck into the bar and ordered drink after drink, until the shifts changed and his teacher refused to serve him. Last I heard, he had become religious, was at a yeshiva in Jerusalem.

Five

I came home at ten past nine and the candles were still flickering and the light was bright enough to read by, so I sat there a while reading until the wicks burnt down, and then I went to my mother's room.

She was sitting up on her bed, in her cotton nightgown, reading Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*.

'Dinner is in the oven,' she said when she saw me in the doorway. 'Where were you?'

'Out.' I came up to her and let her kiss me.

'You smell of smoke,' she said.

She was sick . She went to the doctor often, took pills - dozens of pills, more pills in one week than I had taken my whole life. Whenever I heard the phrase *rainbow nation*, I thought of my mother's pills. And she was working less and less.

'How was your day?'

'Good,' I said, 'and yours?'

'Not wonderful,' she said slowly. She put her book down. We have to talk about it sooner or later. I can't put it off indefinitely.'

'Talk about what?'

'I'm not well, Aidan. You know that. I know you don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk about it. God knows. But, we have to make provisions. To talk things out.'

I went to the shelf above her bed and switched on the radio. A South African band called Cassius was singing: *I've got the blues but I'm green at the gills, give me some thrills,*

give me some pills, give me some girls, I've got the blues. I felt like listening to Miles Davis all of a sudden.

'You'll be fine,' I said. 'You're just tired is all.'

Suddenly all the books beside her bed seemed so stupid and small.

'We can talk later,' I said finally.

'Now is as good a time as any. You're sitting down and I'm feeling well. I have....,' but I did not want to hear.

'Leave me alone,' I said. 'Jesus, Ma, leave me alone. Fuck off. I want to be alone.'
She moved away.

'Aidan...

I went to my room and shut the door. I sat on my bed for a long while trying to read. Then I went back to her room and held her and told her I was sorry. It had been a long time since I held her like that. In the damp light I could see she was crying.

'I'm very ill, Aidan. I don't think you realise how ill I am. I can't pretend anymore. Don't get me wrong, I'd love to pretend, I've been pretending to myself for the last eight months. I got a second opinion, and a second second opinion, and then I had to stop pretending. At first I thought it was flu, and then just getting older, you know, and I suppose perhaps it is getting older. That's part of it, at least. But I just can't pretend anymore. I went to see Doctor Kelley today..'

But I couldn't tell her I loved her. It was like pronouncing the word *cancer* out loud. *I can't put it off indefinitely.*

When I was sure she was asleep I telephoned Stacy. It was half past eleven but I knew she would answer the phone.

'Who is that?' She sounded confused. Then she laughed. 'Aidan? Oh, Aidan. How are you?'

'Fine, I just wanted to find out how you are.'

'I'm okay. I couldn't sleep.'

'Were you reading?'

'Maybe.'

'What were you maybe reading?'

'I don't want to say, it's embarrassing.'

'Just say it really quickly.'

'One of my brother's comic books.'

'No criminal writers.'

'I'm not in a criminal mood. How do you feel?'

'Sexy,' I said. 'What are you wearing?'

'My pajamas.'

'And under your pajamas?' I didn't even know what I was saying anymore.

'More pajamas,' she laughed.

'Like one of those presents that you keep unwrapping, but all you ever get is more wrapping paper.'

'Exactly,' she said, 'a present that you can never open.'

'I want to make love to you.'

'Everyone does,' but she said it softly. She didn't want to wake her mother.

'You and Mrs Brockbank,' I said, as a joke. 'Maybe both of you at the same time.'

'It would have to be a big bed,' she laughed.

'Would you be upset if I chose Mrs Brockbank over you?'

‘Devastated. Although I would choose her over you, too. She’d probably start directing us. She would say, *Aidan you’ll want to take off your clothes and enter the bedroom there, on stage left. And Stacy, position yourself there, and moan like Ophelia.*’

‘I didn’t know Ophelia moaned.’

‘Oh, all the women in those days used to moan. That’s all they were allowed to do. Moan. Men died in battle and women moaned.’

‘Would you moan for me, Stacy?’

‘Quietly,’ she said. And then I heard a soft sound like a candle being blown out.

‘That’s a pretty awful moan, Stacy.’ I was enjoying saying her name. She moaned again, this time louder, cool still.

‘You’ll wake your mother.’ My voice was thick.

‘Did that blow your mind?’

‘Not my mind,’ I said, ‘no.’

‘It’s good to talk to you.’

‘My mother is dying,’ I said.

I couldn’t even hear her breathe.

‘No,’ I said, ‘I’m lying. I don’t know why I said that.’

‘I don’t think you are,’ she said.

‘I have to go,’ I said, and hung up the phone. I thought of calling my father, thought of waking him then and screaming into the phone. I wanted to say: *Now you know what it’s like.* But instead I went back to my room.

But that night I could not sleep. I stood at her door and listened to her breathing. Then I went back to my room and lay there with the light still on. I remembered: *Ye beat the bell that beat to hell, and who shall thrust ye back? / Not I.*

Six

Stacy and I had been seeing other for some time, and our agreement to go to Darling Cabins was a complicit one. We did not speak of it explicitly (we invented a language around it), and yet somehow we sullenly, excitedly agreed. She told her mother that she would be going home with a friend of hers, a girl we both knew. I imagined this moment of deception - a lie traded between daughter and mother - thrilled by the thought that in this secret moment Stacy would be thinking about me. When I was alone I tried out the word *us*, and found it softer than I had suspected.

For some peculiar reason I remember all this: the small, square bed with its thickly folded sheets, the chair in the corner with its broken leather finish, the flat steel sink, the hangers locked into their wooden cupboard. Stacy and I kissed for some time, and then we lay down and watched the lights of passing cars refracted in the window above our bed. The fact that this room had suddenly become ours excited me strangely. When she lay against me I took her hands in mine and kissed her neck, her mouth, the small of her back.

And yet I was overwhelmed by the sensations of the room: the image of the bed being changed every half an hour, footprints swept off the dark blue rug, lipstick wiped from the glass at the sink. I had an image of people arriving together, and then leaving, one at a time. I remember thinking: *my father was here*. Of course I didn't know this for a fact, but who was to say that my father had not gone to every one of these places, gone from one to the other, with a different woman each time. I imagined unfaithful men, meeting other unfaithful men, passing each other on the evening train. They spoke a secret language, not unlike the one my sister and I had spoken as children. Perhaps there was forgiveness in these places, perhaps it

was advertised with the colour TV, with the pool table in the lounge. Perhaps my father had asked forgiveness from his women, perhaps that is why he had brought them here. And then I imagined my father, undressing on the bed where I lay. Or making love to his secretary on the bathroom floor, her skirt hitched around her waist. Or playing pool in the lounge, waiting for a suitable time to telephone my mother and tell her that he would be working late that night.

Stacy and I undressed on separate sides of the bed, with our backs to one another. When she turned to me I noticed that she had a child's flat chest, and that her arms were ruddy with cold. Each time we drew together the man upstairs shouted at the woman he was with, or a car hooted in the narrow street below, or someone outside shouted what sounded like my name. And then I imagined that after we made love Stacy would say 'you're just like your father in bed.' And I would pin her against the bed and say 'you don't know that. You have no proof of that at all.' And then we would make love once more, but quickly and darkly, and never again.

Still we left Darling Cabins together, sat next to each other on the bus ride home. She did not speak, looked resigned and naked all of a sudden in her knitted sweater, her tracksuit pants and tennis shoes. A car had stopped in the middle of the road where a boy dressed as if for church dragged a bent and broken bicycle, followed by another boy, another bicycle.

'I hate places like that,' I said. Stacy must have taken this as a personal affront for she turned away from me, as she had after sex.

'I don't understand you,' she said, and she began to cry. 'I thought you wanted to go there. I thought that's what you wanted to do.'

I tried to comfort her, but she pushed my arms away. It occurred to me that this sadness may be shared between us - with no reason, or explanation - the way warmth was after love. I wondered if each time my father made love he was overwhelmed by this feeling of sadness, destroyed by it in some way.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'This is my stop, I have to get off.' I wanted to beg her not to hate me - places like that bred hate, I thought - but I did not see her the next day, and after that we hardly ever spoke.

Perhaps that is only half of the story. Perhaps it had nothing to do with my father. I was nervous - of course I was nervous. It was only after we left Darling Cabins, after I walked the block and a half home from my stop, after I climbed into bed and switched on my light and opened up a book and put it down again, it was only then, in my frustration and estrangement, that I knew how it felt to be him.

University of Cape Town

AFTER TIME

University of Cape Town

'Up till the age of thirteen I thought a Freudian slip was another term for a French letter,' my mother said. She was sitting up in a bentwood rocking chair that had belonged to my grandmother, with a blanket drawn up to her throat, and we were talking. 'Of course, I thought a French letter was just a letter written in passion, the way a French kiss was a very passionate kiss. I used to stay up late reading *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Balzac, and the novels of Victor Hugo. I read *Madame Bovary*. I don't think I understood half the things she was doing or saying, but I thought I *was* Emma Bovary. I remember reading: *She wanted to die, and she wanted to live in Paris*. Well, that thrilled me, it was like listening to something dark and perverse in another room. I read that sentence over and over.'

'What happened after that?' I asked.

'In the book?'

'No, I mean after you were thirteen, when you had grown up a little bit.' It was necessary to phrase these questions carefully – lately my mother had been telling me her secrets, prefacing each one with 'I *really* shouldn't tell you this.' Then she would talk for half an hour. And I listened to her confessions – it was the least that I could do.

'Well, of course, when I started going out with boys I didn't read quite as much,' she paused because a strand of her wig had caught in one of the slats of the chair. Her wig was dark brown, like her hair, and it came down to just below her ears.

I sat on the edge of my mother's bed, as I had done as a very young child, when I would lie still as a dead person and wait for her to undress. I had to pretend to be asleep otherwise she would tell me to leave the room or close my eyes or hide under the blanket where it was still pitch-black. When I opened my eyes again she would look like a different person: her hair tied back in a bun, her face flushed with rouge, her stockings crackling against her cool green dress. *Putting on my face*, she would call it, which is a frightening expression when you are seven and imagine that she hangs up her face like a hat, or slips it on in the morning, like my grandmother's false teeth.

'I had lots of boyfriends,' my mother said softly, 'before I met your father.'

My father lived in Canada and we had not seen him for fifteen years, though he had telephoned my mother some months ago, after he found out the news. He heard the news from me, in a letter I had written to tell him what I thought of him. I did this from time to time, after I had a few drinks. *Mommy is ill*, I had written, *and is struggling to pay her medical bills, no thanks to you*. But what I wanted to say was: *Thank you so much for leaving us, so I could have her all to myself*. But my father was himself ill, and had long ago decided to throw all my letters away. I couldn't blame him – I wasn't exactly easy to get along with.

I didn't want to know about all my mother's boyfriends, and how she kissed them in the back seats of cars. 'That was all we did,' my mother said, 'most of the time, anyway, that was all we did.' I was interested in all of this, but I didn't exactly want to know. If I happened to meet a man who had taken my mother out years ago, and he said to me, kindly: *Your mother was a wonderful woman. I was in love with her, I sometimes think I should have married her* – I would have been proud. But to hear my mother tell it was a different matter. I suppose I had become conservative, all of a sudden, now that I was mothering her. It somehow didn't seem appropriate, like sitting and watching her undress. Besides, I sometimes used to think that I would like to marry my mother.

I had come to stay with my mother for a month while she was in-between treatments at the Sacred Heart Medical Centre in Somerset West. By the time she consulted a doctor it was too late, and she had lost a breast three years ago. Her cancer had spread in the last eight months. It would be a struggle to keep her out of danger, to keep danger out of her. I learnt all this from her doctor, whom I would telephone late at night. I had long ago given up on learning anything of real importance from my mother.

My conversations with my mother were trivial and comfortable, like they had always been, although something about them had become more urgent in the last few weeks, more fulfilling but also more disappointing, less comforting, and we talked into the night.

I had decided to write down all of my mother's stories, so that I would be left with some kind of a legacy. There was so much about her that I did not know, had not guessed at, could never imagine. Sometimes my image of her changed completely after a story, the way as a child I had not recognised her when she came into her room all made-up. It scared me that one person could put on so many different faces, and still be that one person all along.

And so she told me that she had miscarried a child a year before my birth, that she had forbidden my father to speak about it. She told me about my father's depressions, and how he hit her once or twice. 'That seemed to calm him down,' my mother said, not unhappily. 'I was his mood stabilizer.'

She told me how she had decided to leave, and how he had pleaded with her, and she had hit him, just once, to calm him down. 'He cried like a girl,' she said, 'and I said, *I wouldn't want to live with someone who hits like a man and cries like a girl. It isn't an attractive combination.*'

I knew I was supposed to laugh at this, knew because she had told me the story before – and so I laughed, though I did not find it funny.

There were some things she would not tell me. I wanted to know, but could not ask, what it felt like the first time she looked down at her chest after the operation. I knew that the skin where her breast had been was swollen and broken and stitched. I knew this because I had seen it once by mistake. One walked into rooms too quickly in my house, and was sorry afterwards, but only very briefly – for everything happened fast, our conception of time was accelerated and extreme; we even spoke all at once, in a rush.

The first time I saw my mother after her chemotherapy had begun, she showed me the wig she had started to wear. She had taken to wearing sloppy house clothes and slippers, and had resigned from her job at the bank.

'Do I look pretty?' she had asked me, twirling the ends of the wig, pouting like a girl in one of the silent films we used to watch together on Saturday afternoons.

‘You look beautiful,’ I had said. I had meant it as a joke – for we both seemed to be acting out roles in a parody of some kind, a parody of normalcy – but it was only then that I started to cry.

She held me in her arms and comforted me, ran her fingers through my hair. *You shouldn’t be comforting me*, I wanted to say. For all the talking we did in our house, neither of us spoke that night.

I wanted to hear her voice, even when it hurt for her to talk – I wanted to hear everything she said. Time was limited, but there was no limit to talk. I knew that my mother was dying, that she would soon be dead. I knew that there was nothing I could do to ease her pain, except sit beside her bed and hold her hand. To tuck her into bed as she had once tucked me in. To turn off her light and listen to her stories, as I had always listened to her stories, as my stories listened to hers. I knew that there was a comfort in this for her. This was my job as her son.

I knew that this was a crucial moment in my adult life, that I would remember it for years afterwards, although at the time I remembered nothing. I knew that to a point my conception of who I was as a human being would be based on my actions in the next few weeks. I knew all this, but none of it meant anything.

I woke to the sounds of my mother in pain. I fed her the blue pills, the pink pills, the pea-green pills that helped her sleep, the amber pills, the pills the color of salmon, the pills that smelled sweet as candy, the pills swaddled in a nest of cotton wool. I brought her water and cleaned up after her, and now a month had passed, and she no longer wanted to talk.

I bathed her in a low bath, and it was only her bald head that shocked me, not the body which didn’t look like a woman’s body, a body which didn’t look like it could give birth to anything but horror and sickness and shame. She was embarrassed and I turned around. But I had to help her out again. Later, when I ran the water out of her bath, I could see the strings of shit which floated to the surface, and one or two strands of her wig which had found their way into her underclothes.

I had seen my mother naked and it gave new meaning to the concept *naked*. She had nothing anymore; I could see the veins in her arm when she reached for my hand. Death, I thought, would look like this.

I thought: *I will never again be excited by a woman's naked body. I will live the rest of my life alone.* And then I thought: *after my mother dies, I will have no need for other people.* Perhaps people who had no contact with other people would live forever; perhaps those people wanted nothing more than to die.

She wanted to die, and she wanted to live in Paris. But my mother did not want to die, nor did she want to live in Paris. She no longer had the choice. And yet I thought of the stories I had collected as love letters of a kind. It became a matter of great urgency to write down all her stories before she died. And yet, like the thesis I had long ago given up on, I thought I would never finish collecting these stories. This seemed to be the point. I thought: *everything you need to know, you have known since birth.* This wasn't true, but it was comforting, the way the thought of death must be comforting to the very ill.

Only the moments I spent with her meant anything to me. Now that her hands were smaller, they fit perfectly into mine. I could curl up on her lap like a child. I could slide backwards, headfirst, into her womb once again, insert myself like a cancer into the ripeness of her body, and destroy the sickly tissues from inside out. I would breathe on them and they would disappear. Even if it meant taking my own life, to save hers. For I had done nothing to be proud of; although my mother was proudest of me.

Or, I would make myself whole again, make myself invisible, I would disappear into her bloodstream, smooth as water, pure as air. For if she disappeared I would disappear too, would disappear gladly, with no luggage and no ticket, would disappear into thin air, as they say, into the very air we breathe. Or I would put on a different face, and it would be the face of sadness, and everyone who looked at me would know that I had nothing to offer the world.

If I put my ear to her belly I could hear the blood pounding in her chest, could see through her belly, through the invisible network of veins, her stomach translucent like the glass face of a clock, the outline of an unborn child. It was eating away at her. And it would die with her, this unborn, unbeautiful, unforgiving child. *Let me call him Death.*

At night I went into her room and saw the wig lying alone on her chest of drawers, saw the family photographs above her bed, saw her face tucked, like a child, into sleep.

I could not sleep. I made long telephone calls to people I hadn't spoken to for years, old school friends and girlfriends I no longer loved, people who had forgotten me, pen pals and lecturers I never really knew. I took long baths and urinated in the water and tried to get her smell off me. I thought: *One of us has to be strong*. And tears were a truth that could not be questioned; a question that had no answer.

I went on long drives, at night, with my windows rolled up, sometimes for hours at a time. The radio crackled and hissed and I listened only to the stations whose news I could not understand. I drove across the peninsula, past the shacks and district towns, the sand rising off the dunes like smoke, drove to strange bars and service stations and shops of corrugated iron with *Dark and Lovely* advertised on their sides, where people warmed their hands around fires or sat like cats in lighted windows. And I was happy, I was ridiculously happy. I couldn't wait for her to die - that is the truth. I wanted to rid myself of her.

There is a certain ecstasy in easing someone into death. I sat in the hospital and listened to the sound of shoes clicking across the hall. Different shoes had different sounds and I tried to imagine what kind of person belonged to the shoes they wore. It was after twelve. I could hear the night-duty nurses arrive, their language brusque and busy, like the voices of girls playing volleyball. I had driven her to the hospital the night before and knew right away, had known for some time, that I would never get to drive her home. She knew this too. It was more humane to let her die. I was not disappointed; the relief was exquisite, like urinating in a warm bath. It was as if the story I had been writing for the last twenty-three years was coming to an end (and of course there was a story beyond that story which was sixty, and a story beyond even that), and we could laugh about it afterwards in the knowledge that it was over, that not one word of it could be changed, and I could say to my children, if I ever had

children: *it is a good story, let me tell it to you again.* And they would say: *Yes father, it is a good story, and one day we will have a story of our own, and that story will be written by our children, and so it will continue, this family history, this collection of stories.* And they would lift me up from my bed and heave me into the ground and throw sand onto my body, until only my stories were left alive, and say: *yes it is a very good story, let me tell it to you again.*

Let me tell it to you again. I sat there in the waiting room of the Sacred Heart Hospital Centre and felt like laughing out loud. I laughed hysterically, doubled up like a drunk, like a madman, and people put down their magazines and arrangements of flowers and looked at me and thought: *he is on drugs.* Or, *he is about to lose someone.* And the children all laughed at my laughter. I thought: *Nothing is as funny as your mother's death.* It is hysterical in the deepest sense of the word. The Sacred Heart Hospital. The most powerful of all icons, of all cultures: the mother and her child.

I walked through the hospital gardens, and kept on walking. I past the burnt-out scrub, past the golf course, past the side streets and sand dunes lit up by the headlights of late-night trucks. Every minute I thought my mother had already died. I went back into her room and she was sitting up in bed and looking better than she had for weeks, and her voice was clearer, and I held her hand. I said a prayer to myself. I said: *Please God let her be okay. I will do everything for you from now on. Just let her be okay. I believe in you. I have always believed in you.* I knelt like a child at the foot of her bed.

I read to her from the newspaper until she fell asleep.

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