

BABY BOOMER MEMOIRS #1

HURRAH'S NEST
MEMOIRS OF A MONEY TRADER

Barbara Kennedy

iUniverse, Inc.
Bloomington

Hurrah's Nest

Memoirs of a Money Trader

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*Madison Avenue Publishers
www.MadisonAvePublishers.com
www.BabyBoomerMemoirs.com*

iUniverse books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

*iUniverse
1663 Liberty Drive
Bloomington, IN 47403
www.iuniverse.com
1-800-Authors (1-800-288-4677)*

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ISBN: 978-1-4620-1123-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-4620-1125-4 (clth)

ISBN: 978-1-4620-1124-7 (ebk)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011905449

Printed in the United States of America

iUniverse rev. date: 05/11/2011

Author's Note

I began writing narratives at a very young age and I was prolific, but English classes were brutal because I tend to write conversationally and not every teacher or professor indulged me. I found it extremely difficult to write in an expository manner or to use a formula: a beginning, middle, and an ending. Not all stories follow this structure. Books may, most novels do, but stories don't always. Stories are like puzzles to solve and the route is rarely, as in real life, linear.

Literary agents, editors, publishers and critics have asked me if I consider myself a novelist. I am a storyteller and stories have a life of their own. I speak in a voice that I hope ignites the imagination of the reader. While some professionals hearken back to 'stream of consciousness' as James Joyce styled with extraordinary prowess, my critics have labeled my entire body of work experimental and literary, which is simply contemporary narrative—a singular point of view. The genre "Experimental Literary Fiction" does not displease me.

"Hurrah's Nest – Memoirs of a Money Trader" is my first full length novel, which I began in 1971 in Southbury, Connecticut, in the very house that Katherine Anne Porter penned "Ship of Fools." Ms. Porter may have both inspired and influenced me while I slept. I have always been fascinated that things aren't always as they appear, which is the premise of this story, and this marks the beginning of what has been a remarkable personal journey.

I was a fashion copywriter in New York City when I began writing this story. In 1974, I started a children's clothing company. I designed under the label "Studio New York," and in 1978 built a boutique in Locust Valley named "Ruby Stars, Inc." In 1981, soon after returning from an extended stay on the primitive island of Dominica, Lesser Antilles, I began a twenty year career in the financial markets, in the World Trade Center, trading money in the interbank and capital markets, then as a portfolio manager and investment advisor, while attending graduate school twice in order to specialize in epidemiology, behavioral science, and clinical social work. This education path led to a practice in psycho education and an understanding of human nature that made possible this series of eight full length novels, the Baby Boomer Memoirs, of which this is number one.

I have chosen writing and publishing as my later life's work. I would like my grandchildren to know me and to know how much they are loved. When they discover they too can dream in color or dance to music that no one else seems to hear, they will understand "spirit," which I share lovingly, as I do all of the stories that make up this particular creative body of work.

Barbara Kennedy
2011

Everything I know I learned from someone.

In Memory of my friends Peter A. Duffy and Jerry Hynes,
consummate altar boys and money market brokers/traders.

Thanks to Peter Triolo, Joan Cotugno, Rose VanSand,
Sy Berger, Stephen Orefice, Emil Assentato,
Lynda Aron, George Kundrat, Reed Whittle,
Gary Antonello and Richard Martin for their
generosity and inspiration.

To poet D.C. Oster for loving me and sharing his amazing
family with me.

The eighties were the most amazing years of my life.

And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.

The Gospel of Matthew
21: 12-13

PART ONE

Circa 1955-1975

Meg

MEG OPENED THE BEAUTIFULLY BOUND BOOK AND BEGAN READING.

She passed largely in a state of wonder. Rising early, she would leave the villa at dawn and head for the mountains. There she would follow the ancient irrigation channels that snaked the contour of the hills until she found the shaded spot where she had been the previous day. By then the sun was up, and she would doze a little, lulled by the heavy scent of impending late summer and the music of the goat bells above her as drowsy animals grazed on the mountainside.

By late morning the air was already still and weighty with heat. She could hear water flowing through a nearby stream and into a stone tank cut into the hillside. She did not hear anyone approaching, and the first she knew of the soldier's arrival was the sound of his footsteps very near behind her.

"I confess I owe you an apology," the soldier said, stepping out of the shadow into the sun.

She ignored him.

"It is getting hot, isn't it?" he continued. "Are you not warm under that jacket?"

"I am quite comfortable," she answered.

He pondered. He pointed to the water in the stream, cool and green in the shade. "Do you swim?"

"No. I never learned."

"Come." He reached out and took her by the elbow.

She shook him away. "No, really."

He smiled at her. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind if I carry on."

She looked at him steadily, not prepared to blink. “You may do as you please.”

He jumped to his feet and began to unbutton his shirt. “It will not disturb you?”

She returned his gaze. “Of course not. Why should it?”

He continued to tug at his buttons, then dropped his shirt to the ground and began to undo his boots. “You see, there’s something about you,” he said as he undressed. “Something intriguing. I thought you might be shy and even a virgin.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said. “I have brothers.”

He arched an eyebrow at that and continued to undress. When he was naked, he moved slowly to the stream’s edge and lowered his toned and tanned body into the cool water. As he bathed, she turned her back to him, interested as she was, he was sure of it; she was determined not to show it. She understood that a virgin was a small statue under a glass globe. And she surely wasn’t that.

When he emerged from his bath, he took his clothes and dried himself with them. When he was dressed, he returned to where she sat and resumed his position on the river bank beside her. For a while, there was silence between them.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Before she could answer, he pressed a heavy gold coin into the palm of her hand. Its size and weight identified its value instantly. She knew the wealth it represented, but more, it was infused with the warmth of his hand. He slipped his fingers inside the open neck of her blouse and explored the geography of her upper body without much resistance. She was dizzy with excitement, not from him, but from the coin, the monetary value, her ticket out of this godforsaken place. His warm flesh, and hers, seemed to melt involuntarily into a warm moving spring. He took the coin from her and slipped it into his trouser pocket.

“Find it,” he murmured softly, smelling her hair, licking his own lips deliciously. He guided her hand into the slit in his trousers.

“Fuck her!” Meg screamed and threw Becky Wolcott’s newly published best seller clear across the room. “She can’t write that. That’s my story! *Fuck her!*”

She could never even throw straight, Meg admonished herself, the lamp crashing to the floor—*pop!*—the bulb smashing like a hastily hung Christmas ornament. *Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!*

Meg had memory lapses. Without warning, she was hit with a meteor of emptiness, like airy filament, devoid of content or orientation. Blackouts, you might say. She stood up, smoothed the front of her silk robe, and walked to the cabinet she'd been eyeing for an hour. It was finally noon somewhere, she laughed, perhaps Bombay, and she bowed at the bottle as she poured herself an Absolut.

The hot summer air hung about the room. Barely enough air for one person. Meg felt this way most of the time no matter where she was. She could never wear turtlenecks or scarves around her neck. Already she gasped for air for no apparent reason. A silk scarf? Asphyxiating. A pearl choker? Out of the question.

Meg walked back to the writing desk and glanced at the precious and exotic words strung playfully like a child's bracelet, glass beads sliding onto the silken thread of her storyline—as she designed sentences on a page, as she penciled them in a rice paper notebook. The rice paper notebook, a gift Becky had brought back from one of her trips to Hong Kong. Dust and cigarette smoke lingered in a ring around the room. Meg folded her arms and laughed—she didn't remember Becky ever having actually gone to Hong Kong.

Even now as Meg attempted to write about her life, her own memoirs, even now she thought about Becky, wanted instead to write about Becky, to be upstaged by Becky, to be Becky.

It was a time of tangled lives, was most of what Meg had written, and each of the characters in this stage play had his or her own point in the web, from the bias of which the story and subplots of each has been spun. I was always pushed into a tight corner seat around the kitchen table, and within that fetal wedge, I learned to be quick and definite. Unfortunately but predictably, from that angle, my perspective of the world grew triangular, but never symmetrical, instead obtuse.

She continued ...

YEARS OF ANALYSIS SHOWED ME THAT, similar to dyslexia, I had to turn things around until they took a form both comprehensible

and palatable. I loved corn and I loved lima beans, but I had to separate succotash on my dinner plate in order to finish my meal.

It has been a long time now that Becky has played a key role in my life, my best friend during childhood and by equal measure, my young adult life. We shared intimacies like sisters. I am older than Becky by a week, but she is technically my aunt. I was never sure of my place in the world, even then, even now. My very beginnings were somewhat tentative, but never mind that. All that distance between us melted with each letter, Becky's and mine. We wrote letters in longhand back then. None of this electronic instant gratification mail. My letters took a week to get to New York, and Becky's took an interminable four days to get from New York to Florida where I lived with my father, whom I always referred to as Tony.

Becky and I were born in that very room, and in that very bed in the front room of Nana's house in Corona, Queens. In that same room with the tarnished crucifix tied up with some dry palm, and the framed picture of our Holy Father Pope Pius XII next to the bed, Becky and I were squired into this world. Sweet. Innocent. Unaware. Doomed right out of the womb.

THE IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN THAT SMALL QUEENS NEIGHBORHOOD prayed endlessly, during novenas and vigils and daily Mass. They had nothing else to do. They confessed hoards of exaggerated sins, asked for forgiveness from silhouettes in musty confessionals at the back of the church, and prayed for special favors from the Holy Father—later bartering and trading these favors amongst themselves and with the sick and dying.

“Plenary indulgences,” a commodity, guaranteed by the Holy Father if not securitized by God directly, and transferable like bearer bonds, or “Get out of jail free” cards. They were shuffled, dealt, and traded amongst the beatified just as corn, hog, and hay futures contracts are traded every day on Wall Street.

One of these old women, my Nana, spent entire days in that room, rocking in that wicker chair near the front window, watching us, Becky and me. Two demanding babies, infants squirming side by side in a large makeshift bassinet. Mouths to feed, both girls, both somehow related. Our movements were visually beautiful, and the baby sounds echoed back and forth between us, silver-toned like the sound of tinkling instruments or

soft wind chimes. She probably couldn't keep any of it straight. Which is which? Who is who? And why did it matter anyway? We were a family.

Could she actually hear, as they said after she died, the force of new life coursing generously through our veins as she did the sap of her trees and every living pulsing thing in her garden? Her own blood tired now at the end, and dried to a powder now, issuing like rust blowing through a complicated system of minute conduits.

Accepting with the calm clarity of one who has despaired beyond any hope of hope, Nana's sad and shrunken breasts like the dugs of an old cow echoed her once powerful urge to swell like fruit with their own sweet milk. The indescribable sensation of having them suckled by the firm, paining gums of her own infants, the pull of her uterus, the engorged glands, swollen and pink. Echoes. They are but echoes now, faint and distant. Our time to bear that luscious fruit has past. How quickly.

Nana picked up the photograph of the Pope and kissed it, kissed him on the lips. "Oh, Padre," she would say as she kissed him again on the forehead and touched his cheek with the back of her finger. Her only remaining fig tree, a giant thing visible through the window, was already braced for winter and mummified in black tar paper.

"Oh, Padre."

Nana's nervous fingers rolled over her rosary beads repeatedly, her head nodding constantly, occasionally smiling and winking at His Holiness: *Jesus, Jesus, thy womb, Jesus.*

I imagine this went on for days. It was a novena with indefatigable stations and crosses, nodding and genuflecting. After Nana died, some said she was sick and crazy from working too near the sick and crazy. I imagine there is some truth to that.

Family is like a damn tapestry, I learned. No matter where you go and no matter where you end up, you cannot escape it or *them*. All their threads and all of yours intermingled in some coat of arms, or silence, a family pattern, or legacy, with all the texture and dropped stitches of all ill-fated afghans devoured by insatiable larvae.

This woman, Nana, could have played the Italian widow straight from the Character Actors' Guild, taken directly from central casting for a refugee documentary only Martin Scorsese could be directing. Costumed

in the ubiquitous washed-out black cotton dress of the 1900 European widow, she wore black leather shoes laced up to where her ankles used to be and underneath it all, a jeweled medallion embedded with a gold saint, stuck in the wrinkled cleavage of her bosom. A gold ring, thin and faded, on her swollen wedding finger.

Those gray eyes and her gray wrinkled skin. And her gray streaked hair drawn back and braided into an exceedingly complex bun, which her swift fingers could produce with miraculous speed, held in place, aloft, by gray wire hairpins. She rarely smiled. She had sinned gravely, it seemed, at some time in the remote past—the very, very remote past—and now was suitably penitent. Her heart was so pierced by suffering she could never hope to know, they said, clucking their tongues in unison, after she died.

Know *what*?

Nana was the so-called *levatrice* in the village since her arrival in America at the turn of the century. So, of course she midwifed me and, a week later, she midwifed Becky. My mother died during the birthing ordeal—now, how was that possible? The story continues that my grandfather, Becky's father, somehow distracted or demented, fell from the church steeple he was repairing and he also died. On the other hand, maybe he died first. The story has been pieced together so many times I could barely keep track of who I was in the family afghan, and where I necessarily fit into the story, if at all.

Becky's mother—who was my grandmother—went to bed permanently. Her head ached, she said with an unreal, unclear sense of loss. A husband gone, a daughter gone—was this possible? Two sudden deaths, two newborn infants. Two widows and two orphans. Two infants up all night fussing, with bottles to sterilize, and diapers on the clothes line, baths and feedings. It was all too much. She only had two hands, she would scream, and then collapse. She needed a prescription for months.

Nana took over. Calm, she sat and rocked, and nodded her head, *mea culpa, mea culpa*, again and again, *mea maxima culpa*. Back and forth, back and forth, like a crazy porch monkey, winking at the Pope.

My grieving father, Tony, buried my mother and then my grandfather, as it were, packed up his few belongings, wrapped me in some pink thing, and we stole out of there one night at one in the morning and headed south together for the winter. Or forever, he said, whichever lasted longer.

Snowbirds, they called us. After a couple of years, they called us Natives.

“They ask for my work station,” Tony boasted into the black telephone receiver. He was talking long distance to my other grandmother, his mother, also in New York, about his new job. “‘Put them in Tony’s station,’ says the maitre d’,” he tells her. “‘He’s the best waiter in all of Miami.’”

Tony was beaming proudly.

Tony took care of them, of me, of everything.

“Let me talk to her,” I pestered. But he pushed me away and whispered, “It’s long distance.” His eyes were wide and fearful.

So for four cents Becky and I wrote letters.

Born in the same bed a few days apart, Becky and I lay in a shared laundry basket, inhaling each other’s breath, and then without warning, we were pulled apart just like that, like the saltwater taffy on the boardwalk at Coney Island. I was sent to Tony’s station on the beach in Florida, and Becky stayed in New York City with Grandma and Nana.

It was twenty-three years before Becky and I lay in the same crib again—on her king-size bed. Except for that one brief visit when Nana died, when we were still just kids, I don’t remember much, and anyway our incessant letter writing, as I told you, kept us up-to-date with each other’s lives. There was school, sneaking lipstick and cigarettes, and there was Roger Pinsky who lived across the street.

I didn’t write to Becky about Roger. I didn’t know if she could keep a secret or if Grandma or Nana read my letters and would tell Tony, and I would get in trouble. Becky wrote to me mostly about concerts in Central Park. She went to ‘tea’ at the Plaza Hotel, but I’m not sure I believed her; she said she went to Broadway plays and to art galleries in Greenwich Village. She went with her friend, Margot, who was some kind of exchange student, to see the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Plaza and then to Lord & Taylor to shop for Christmas presents. She sent me red socks. With bells. And a hair band, which I gave away in a grab bag at school.

I wanted to go to New York City and live with Becky, Grandmother, and Nana. I went to sleep on Christmas Eve, listening to the crickets, and I wished I could just leave. All I wanted was to wake up in the morning, to see white snow sparkling on the great lawn in Central Park, and to dance on the ice. I wanted to go to parties too, and get engraved invitations like

the ones Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck always got, and to wear chiffon dresses with petticoats that get caught in a breeze on the street corner; a little rouge to bring out my blush—my surprise. My leading man and I would sing show tunes and tap dance up and down the front stoop of Nana’s house.

The stars, through space, look appliquéd on tulle, and there would be a twinkle in his eye, a reflection of the moon, and he would take me in his arms—

In the morning, I was in my old bed, still in Tony’s station, still in Florida.

THERE WAS NOTHING WRONG WITH TONY. Don’t get me wrong. But, well, Tony was sort of a quiet guy who didn’t seem to enjoy much of anything in his life. Occasionally he brought out an ancient, practically decomposing photo album—pretty much all that remained of my mother. Pictures of Mother. Memories of Mother. Tiny yellowed snapshots of a woman who once ran on the beach in a shapeless black bathing sarong.

“You look just like her,” Tony whispered as we flipped through the book together. He retold stories that hardly deviated and then laughed nervously. We laughed together. Soon, exhausted and wistful, he left the kitchen table; he walked into his bedroom, closed the door, *click*, and I sat alone under the flickering fluorescent kitchen light. All alone, I would finish his wine, dry the dishes, and go to bed.

At night, the flies would buzz and the mosquitoes would attack. As soon as I turned out the light, they were at me, zooming around my ears. Killing them was useless. For every dead one, ten more appeared.

The four room aluminum-sided box where we lived didn’t have a garage or a driveway, a sidewalk, or even a curb. The beach was a block and a half away. During storms, I would lie in bed and listen to the Atlantic Ocean roar and crash, pound and whistle. A single palm tree marked the end of a scrubby patch that passed for our garden, and a few tropical bushes dotted the yard. The sky was cloudless on most days, and perfect tropical blue. It was hot and humid. Another boring day; the minutes ticked by. Another week, another month. Tick-tick-tick—

Tony and I never discussed it, but we were adrift, a long way from home. I didn’t understand what fatalism was—but was this all predestined? It didn’t feel right. And if it was, why? I mean, how could a master mason

fall off church scaffolding and die? And how could Nana allow my mother to die? Cold dead. And why couldn't we all live in New York together? I asked Tony, who was always away at his workstation anyway. He took this to mean that I didn't love him. Well, I kind of didn't. Gone to his upscale restaurant in a beachfront Hotel on Collins Avenue. The Restaurant. My father pressing his nose against the glass of a life that stretched far beyond the world he had known, and never able to get past the threshold and enter it with the rest.

He left a noodle and mushroom soup casserole in the oven and a pile of clean folded clothes on my bed. We were exiled. I was motherless. He, wifeless. We did the best we could. Together. Alone.

I sat on her mauve chenille bedspread only once in a dream, and I told her, the ghost of my dead mother, *Mom*, about my first husband, Dick Costa, as she brushed my hair, turned up the hem on my wedding dress, and had the sex talk. She might have shared secrets about her own wedding night.

Tony, on the other hand, said he wished I wouldn't grow up and go out there. He did not say what that meant, out there, only that he didn't want me to get burned, he said, and I could never be sure if he meant burned by the hot Florida sun or by broken promises and lost dreams.

The sadness and responsibility he felt for my mother's demise hung on him like a wet blanket, always heavy and always there. Hunched over the table, in an angular pose, cold and remote, he kept his secrets always just under the blanket, just far enough away, just barely hidden from view. Circles under his doleful eyes, his hair gone prematurely gray, suggested existential worries that could never be expressed by him or anyone. It wasn't your fault, I wanted to say to him, you didn't have sex, you made love, and you made me. How could you have affected this outcome? But how could I say this to my father? He grieved endlessly.

"It changes the fabric," he cautioned me.

I did not want to get burned either, but I did want to get on with my life.

I WAS A LONELY CHILD. Some lonely children grow up to be cold. I grew up to be pathetic. I needed to touch and to be touched. I was alone, lonely, sad, and drifting, as in amniotic fluid, insulated from everyone. No touching. No skin. It was as though I was encased in a plastic bubble,

like one of those children whose environment has become toxic and life threatening.

When Becky sent me a photograph from New York, I sent one back. Her mother, my grandmother, sent me boxes of clothes. A pink cotton blouse, a plaid pleated skirt, and a cardigan sweater set with pearl buttons. I wasn't as slim as Becky, because I liked bread and butter, but Grandmother had no way of knowing this. Even so, from the photos, we could easily pass for sisters. My hair was lighter from the sun and peroxide, and hers was short and straight, held back off her face with a hair band. She had style and discipline—and plaid hair bands. Maybe it had mostly to do with having a mother and a grandmother to teach her nice things and to buy her nice things. Roger said that Becky looked *sophisticated* when I showed him her picture. He smiled and said I should invite her to visit sometime. He said that we could both be his friend.

I envied her. Sophisticated. I wasn't even sure how to spell it. I just knew that I wanted it and Becky was going to have to give me some of hers.

I romanticized about changing my life and what it was going to look like when I grew up and could do anything I wanted. When I wasn't afraid. When what the neighbors think or say no longer mattered. I had a plan—Becky would call it an agenda. She sent me a picture of her first boyfriend, tall and tan, at her eighth grade graduation; then her high school prom, her wedding, her honeymoon, her new husband standing in front of a marble statue in Rome. Then came the photographs of foreign cars, babies, and renovations. She was always well dressed, and her hair band looked somehow more like a tiara now. She had this look, this indefinable look that was more than discipline. We looked like sisters, almost like twins, but Becky had this very serene and composed look, aware yet aloof, satisfied, and watching. She looked like royalty.

I remember once, but only for a split second, thinking that is my life! That is my boyfriend! That is my husband and my house! Those are my babies! You have stolen my picture album. Those are my pictures. That is my agenda.

When I was about ten, Tony felt he had to go to New York when Nana died to pay his respects to her, the grandmother of his dead wife, and also to the family that banished us. Distant uncles, distant aunts, second and

third cousins, once or twice removed, all very distant, assembled from far and wide to pay their own respects to the old bat who killed my mother and called the police on Roger.

Tony told me at first that I couldn't afford to miss school, that my report card was disappointing. We both knew I wasn't going to Yale. My only aspiration was to be an actress. One way or another, these little tap pants were getting to New York. If I had to struggle, I'd moonlight as a Rockette at Radio City Music Hall or take a role on a soap opera.

When I was five feet three inches tall for six straight months, I took vitamin formulas; I took tap, ballet, and jazz lessons. I ran eight miles after school and lifted weights. I dreaded that I might have stopped growing, which, of course, I had. My little body was tan and toned. Even though I struggled with remembering lines, I could pick up a dance routine pretty quickly. And that usually saved me.

I was going to New York if it killed me. Yes, even if it killed me.

During that brief visit to New York, I saw Becky at the funeral parlor. We sat nearby, but we did not talk. Her eyes reddened when we did talk, but she did not cry. I tried to hold her hand but she pulled away. She was very upset that Nana had died. She said that she had something important to tell me about Nana, and I told her that I had something to tell her about Nana also.

NANA CAME TO FLORIDA ONLY ONCE right before she died. Nana traveled with her brown rosary beads, which looked like coffee beans, in her generous pocket and she carried a small suitcase through the airport terminal. Her outfits, I remember, didn't change much—and also she carried under her arm a bird, her canary, in a perforated shoebox tied with string. And from her wrist, a big old smelly provolone cheese coated in wax also tied with string. For a week, she washed everything in the house with ammonia, vinegar, or chlorine bleach. She put olive oil on everything including the furniture, and it was Nana who finally combed out my hair and braided it.

We tried to talk but the old woman spoke little English. We sat on my bed making noises, yes, yes, Nana, I understand. *Capice? Capice?* In monkey-see-monkey-do expressions. The disease that I had only heard about had surfaced; I could see it in her eyes. On the eve of her departure, before Tony came home from work, Nana came into my room and sat

down slowly on my bed. She started talking about Beatrice. I tried to explain to her that I did not know anyone named Beatrice.

Beatrice is a good girl, Nana was saying. *Bella*, she said like that, *Bella*, and then she put her hand on my head, cleared her throat, and began to speak to me in a most amazing way. She spoke so I could understand her, as though she were reciting for a great part. With her hand on my head, she cleared her throat repeatedly and said, "Things happen we no can explain." She took a breath. "Things sometimes go in a circle, and sometimes, *eh!*" She raised her hand, "They no go at all. Capice? No?" She sighed, exasperated, and threw both of her hands up. She seemed to be speaking out of some deep vacuum of nervous exhaustion, transmitting in broken English this secret message in a voice soft, clear, and oddly confidential. "Well, you capice someday." She shook her whole hand at me like the Queen of England waved to her subjects. Kind of a whole hand saying *eh!*

"My Momma, if she be ere today, she tells you such a story. A familia t'ing. The dead girl and familia, a sister. But for me, I no tell you. I no planta the seed. Maybe I do bad t'inga. But I taka the curse ana bury ina the ground forever. Forever away from the breathing." She waved her hands away, away.

Whatever was she talking about?

"Be pure," she continued, spooking me. "You capice whata Ima say to you? Pure?"

"Sure, Nana," I said, seeing no harm in it. Then she pressed a heavy gold coin into my hand, fumbled with her rosary beads, and began intonation of prayer.

Characteristically for one so old, she thought herself as praying silently. Her voice rose and fell in the quiet, warm room like a bee buzzing from blossom to blossom in a field of clover. Her spotted hands appeared, against the black of her dress, restless—fingering something that hung from her neck. I figured she was unsteady from her illness, little else. How was I to know what she was trying to tell me?—and who the hell was Beatrice? I put the coin under my pillow. I never spoke about this with anyone. Not even to Becky the day of Nana's funeral.

BECKY AND I SAT QUIETLY ON THE COOL SIDE AISLE at the back of the dim church. It was pungent, I remember, with polished wood

and incense, frankincense or myrrh—lingering on high up in the dark stained rafters.

One almost fell to one's knees automatically. We did not have reverend churches like this in Florida—not that Tony and I went to Sunday Mass with any regularity.

I sat as still as a stone and watched motes of dust drifting in the shaft of light streaming through the stained glass side windows. Colors projected onto the floor and, as if in obedience, ordered to move in sharply confined patterns of light. Across a short row of pews was the statue of a saint. It reminded me of my mother. Dead. The pupils of her eyes, in a certain light at the correct angle, shone violet like the faded ones in the old picture album. Not grief stricken—regretful, if anything. Pained, mildly pained, as if having sought fidelity from the unfaithful. Trust from the untrustworthy. And hope from the hopeless. Knowing, all the time, it was what it was. Simply not to be.

I walked over to get a better look. An unsteady metal carriage of red candles flickered and hissed as they burned. Right above them the statue's feet bled, pitted with grave sores, tiny pinpoint bursts in bubbles from wounds inflicted by shackles of entwined branches of thorns, no less animated by a prism of the flickering hot red dots. I dipped a lit taper into the jar. It went out. Then I lit each candle stub on the little staircase. It became a small altar with its twenty-one flames flickering in the sudden draught. A red ash detached itself, floated up in a twist of gray smoke to the statue's waxen face; her blue-black hair brushed with green, the green of moldering bread, all shining and draped about her head and shoulders. Her broken lips, perfect lips, parched and parted like a flower about to unfold and promise something, bestow something. We are supposed to lean in and listen.

Do you hear it?

Behind me, I heard Tony clear his throat. I obediently returned to my seat.

Becky sat there quietly with her ankles crossed. I fussed over her new nylon stockings, how sheer, how straight her seams were. She had a switched-on smile. Her face would flick from solemn to smile and back again in an instant. There were no intermediate positions. On, off.

What else can I say about the funeral mass? Old men and fat women spoke to me in their natural “tongue,” which was foreign, and everyone waved their hands or hankies whether they were talking, listening, crying,

or eating. It didn't matter. Why were they carrying on so? Nana died. She was an old woman. Anyone could see that. She lived a long life and now she is dead.

*I had a good life.
I had a hard life.
I earned my place
with the Holy Father.*

Didn't anyone hear it?
I turned to Becky, *Did you ...?*

Becky and I were standing near the coffin. Beside me was another statue, The Virgin of Lourdes. This one was very unlike the other one. This depiction of the Virgin donned a white robe with a white veil draped about her head and shoulders, a blue sash around her waist and a golden rose at her right foot. This goddess, gently smiling, had two pinkish spots on her face, one in the middle of each cheek, like you would see on a porcelain doll, just above her cheekbones. Celestial would characterize her hands, slender and delicate, clasped in prayer, her eyes turned up to the heavens in ecstasy.

All around us was weeping and nodding, a wave of slow movement toward the coffin and then away from it. We were surrounded by fat swells of red roses in brass vases. The sickening oily perfume of the roses, the smoky incense; the rancid cassock worn by the old priest, who was in a hurry and talking fast; the warm bologna sandwich that someone was eating nearby. Stenches made more sharply pungent by the day's heat and humidity. Everyone was wet and mopping their faces, men with crumpled paper and yellowed handkerchiefs, women with embroidered ones. The women fanned themselves furiously, in their black veils, leading prayers, humming their incantations—probably because they did not know the words, as we sing rock and roll songs and hum the parts when we do not know the words. They were mouthing the lyrics and humming the melody. Their pinpricks of guilt of the long-forgotten words accounted for the fervor with which they delivered what fragments of prayer they could conjure. Becky's mother fell into someone's arms. Becky made a move toward her, but was stopped by someone who whispered into the back of her neck, and she sat back.

I wondered which of us had to endure pus-filled self-inflicted skin wounds in the back of the old church next to the smelly confessionals, and which of us got chosen to wear beautiful robes and garlands, and to stand in the blazing arboretum, gazing heavenward in pure orgasm.

An insurmountable wall divided the world into two parts. Some people were on one side of the wall, some were on the other. One side was hell, the other was heaven, and your place was predetermined before you were even born. There was no possibility of choice. Everything was decided from the beginning.

Becky and I approached Nana's coffin together and kneeled before the ornate box. I leaned forward to get a good look at this other purported saint, The Nana. She always wore something shapeless, a big black bag. Now, dead, she lay in lilac chiffon with her hair tied back with fresh violets. Her fingers were waxy, yellowish—interlaced and tied as if joined in prayer by her crystal rosary beads. I could not believe that this was the old woman that once sat in a lump on my bed and spoke of some family *t'inga* she was going to bury—what was it that she said to me?—on that stormy Saturday, everything was blowing around in the yard.

Becky kneeled at Nana's open coffin motionless and whispered a Hail Mary. She made the sign of the cross and started to rock back off her knees. I reached forward to touch the dead Nana's hand, but someone pulled me back, *don't touch!* I stumbled, and saw a group of angry women discussing me; one pointed her finger directly at me. Tony managed to look his craziest, his hair ragged, his dark eyes narrowed, the corners of his mouth raised in a ghastly-contorted grin of fear. In that instant, I realized the weirdness of all this. The room got very quiet.

"*Strega! Strega!*" I heard one of those fat creatures scream across the room at me. I naturally became frightened. My throat closed up so I felt I couldn't breathe, as if I was going to suffocate. There was not enough air. There was never enough air. Everything became blurred. The priest had uttered some incoherent exclamation. I turned to Becky. Tears were spilling out of her eyes and running down her cheeks and her nose was bubbling. She fell into a nearby chair and sat with her eyes closed. It was as though I was seeing or half-seeing my mother like that, with her eyes closed, crying. Someone approached Becky and pushed her head down into her lap. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears. There seemed to be some confusion I did not grasp. Chairs were moving and screeching,

hands were on me. Something horrible was going to occur, a desecration, and I felt a desire to scream when I felt tightness in my whole body. Release. Issue. Welcomed warmth and relief. Then the sudden realization that I was peeing in my pants ... I must have fainted.

Later that night I woke, not howling, but with a noise in my throat trying to be howling, as if I was trying to shout a name but no sound was coming. What was my name? It was like trying to catch a fish with your hands: The more you pursue it, the more it slips away. There was no one around to ask, "Who am I? Does anyone know who I am, and where I am, and to whom I belong?"

An enormous cavity formed inside me, and I roamed about in that cavity with my eyes and my mouth wide open, like a fish in an aquarium. I was the fish and its owner, too. I existed, and I watched myself existing. And even though I existed and I was watching myself exist, I still was not certain that I existed. Then, all at once and all together, the church bells started to ring. That's what woke me up. It's morning, I said to myself, thank God.

In frenzy, a few short hours later, Tony and I left in a taxi back to the airport and away from New York and back to the beach.

I told all of my girlfriends at school about my trip to New York City to visit my cousin. I went to Bloomingdale's, the Statue of Liberty, and the Empire State Building, I told them. Really, it was marvelous. My cousin, Becky, her grandma calls her Beatrice, gave me many nice things. I watched them watching me—envy and voyeurism, a delicious soup.

I learned something that day that allowed me to survive and function for the rest of my life. I discovered that one thing could look like another, and that the facts of a situation do not necessarily indicate anything about the truth of a situation. At that moment, fact and truth became separated and commenced to wander like twins in a fairy tale, waiting to be reunited by that special someone who possessed the secret of telling them apart. Some might surmise that on that day I simply learned how to lie.

A lie has a taste all its own. Blocky and bitter, and never quite right. Like when you bite into a piece of fancy chocolate expecting toffee filling and you get lemon zest instead. When you lie, you murder some part of the universe. Lying and holding the world in the palm of your hand are two sides of the same coin.

A few weeks later, Becky and I were back to our weekly dramatizations of life: going steady; seamless stockings, which were the current rage; and of course, how much we missed each other. Becky only mentioned the incident once. She said she was sorry I got sick and she hoped I felt better. It was probably the heat. And I still did not tell her about Roger, how he got girls to go into his garage and take off their panties.

The secrets most of all would be our great undoing.

TONY WAS SO PROUD AND SO RELIEVED THE DAY I GRADUATED from high school. Unlike I had ever seen him, Tony sat up straight, sober and proud in the audience in the newly air-conditioned high school gymnasium; his mother, who was my other grandmother, visiting from Brooklyn, was at his side. Everyone lived in New York, I mused as I stood there waiting for the principal to call out my name.

I expected to be putting together a portfolio soon, and so I took full advantage of the opportunity to pose for shots, smiling left side, smiling right side, look up, chin down, don't blink, smile. Tony snapped his boxy Hawkeye camera that day, capturing each angle of me with my cap and ill-fitting gown blowing in the unpredicted rain, my gown getting caught on a chair during the procession and again in the door afterward. I sent a few photographs to Becky and Grandmother along with my new address at the girls' dorm at Teacher's College in Pensacola, Florida.

The last few days of summer dripped away like honey off a spoon, but that fateful day did finally roll around. It was time to haul Tony's old Army footlocker and a few shopping bags into the trunk of his old Ford.

Tony drank every day, quietly, justifying this to himself after a few belts with the same old complaints of some war wound—some artillery shrapnel removed from his legs eons ago. He eventually got to the part in the script where he recited tearfully that he wished I would reconsider leaving home, attend the local community college, and continue to live at home. With him. Like this. Forever. Maybe not even go to college. I could save my money, he said, and have a big wedding. It was many tips, he said. He was on his feet all day, every day. His veins were getting bad. Nevertheless, I said, I had the leading role in every school production; I had been inducted into the National Thespian Society by the middle of my sophomore year. I had every hope and dream, my whole future, tied

up in going to New York and being a star. He would never be able to talk me out of it. Never. It was final.

As we drove north on the turnpike up the Florida peninsula, we were at least edging in the right direction. I felt that I was finally on my way, making the first of many advances toward my agenda, the very heart of New York City. I'll show them. Every one of them who thought I was a loser and said that I would never amount to anything but an unwed mother.

Tony did not mumble more than a couple of words during the entire six-hour trip. We stopped the car twice to get gas and once to check the road map. I raised my chin in what I figured was a most dignified manner, suppressing my excitement. I sat back imagining a closet full of beaded evening gowns and shoes with narrow straps that circle my ankles. I imagined the lights at the end of the tunnel as neon, the soft light of late night and champagne suppers, and curtain calls. And, the bravos! The encores! And the work. The memorizing. The rehearsals. Hours in makeup. Fittings. Hot lights. A few more hours and my journey would commence. I became agitated, my stomach began to spin and, mercifully, I fell asleep.

Something strange then came over me. I felt myself slipping out of a pre-existing skin, like falling out of something and into something else, something that existed all along without me, until just then, when I experienced my first flash of *déjà vu*. It was like all this had happened before—but to someone else. It felt strangely familiar, as if it had been choreographed, as if I were stepping into someone else's shoes.

BECKY WROTE THAT SHE WAS AGONIZING through The School of Journalism at New York University. She wrote and wrote and wrote. Her letters eventually grew more and more abstract. She wanted to express her opinions, to have ambitions, a career, and a way to win her own way in the world. Becky said she was wandering aimlessly, hopelessly lost, looking for something tangible and absolute. "I have a birth certificate, therefore I exist?" is the way she opened one letter to me. I occasionally wrote back. I sat in the typing lab at school during lunch and answered her letters on the backside of used typing paper. I had so many versions; I would get a chuckle out of my life when I reread stories I wrote to her. Sometimes I would not even send them, but saved them in a small box to bring out someday as proof that I did have a life and therefore I was also.

Becky was at a crossroad, I told her. She felt lost? Me too, and so did everyone I knew. Becky figured that because she was studying to be a writer, she should be able to write about it. It. What is it? When do we know it? When do we have it? She wrote longhand. She said she couldn't type. Did I know shorthand? Between sentences, she scribbled designs like Grecian friezes around an ancient clay vase. I didn't quite get what she was trying to convey and was too insecure to ask. Instead I told her not to be so dramatic and gloomy.

I, at least, could type.

Tony used to say that you can see a flea on the other person, but you cannot see the elephant on yourself. Not me. The elephant was a big pink suede thing. I was the one feeling insignificant, unattractive, and dumb. Becky already had everything. She was beautiful and smart; she was talented; and she did everything with grace, imagination, and discipline. I was secretly growing tired of her and angry with myself. I said an Act of Contrition, which did not change anything, but maybe God would forgive me, change my fortune. Put love in my life.

It all comes down to this, she wrote, to fall or not to fall—all else follows.

“So that's a, *what*, Dick? A *metaphor*?” I would ask.

“Drivel.”

ONCE I BECAME INVOLVED WITH DICK, I did not get around to answering Becky's letters in as much detail as before. I told her that I worked with Dick, who was an adjunct professor and faculty director in the drama department at school. He was a B movie child actor, in a third generation off Broadway family, who inherited a small theater in Little Italy with some cousins. He taught a year at Hunter College before he enlisted in the Navy, went to Vietnam twice, and was recently discharged.

We had fun. We drank wine mostly, dressed up as various characters in various costumes, played all the great parts, and sang all the great songs. We had sex in the Green Room between acts, and sometimes instead of going to class. We spent some nights on the old couch because we were too drunk to find our way back to the girls' dorm or Dick's apartment clear across town. Forget my grades, but our student reviews were so full of kudos, and besides I was a junior; I was past the point of being bounced back to Pembroke Pines Community College. Everything seemed

promising from my childlike view. Time whipped by, and the four years simply vanished.

BECKY, IN THE MEANTIME, MET KEVIN ROBERTSON WOLCOTT III and they were married. Their baby announcements arrived soon after. Becky and Kevin and toddler Doug, and then new baby, Craig, were living the life. She wrote to me from plush green suburbs, out on Long Island, and I sensed she was settled down for the moment, nothing more. Kevin was good to her, no doubt, providing her with all the lovely and enviable fruits that his success brought and bought. What enviable bliss! Just imagine! I looked over at Dick. He said he would try, and one day before rehearsal he climbed to the top of the water tower in his lime green tights and he painted my name on the water tank in white poster paint so close to heaven my stardom was imminent. Two days later, my name was washed away by rain. So much for promise. So much for fame. That pretty much sums up my fifteen minutes.

Dick was different. He wanted to spread his idealistic left-winged ideals, which allowed him to smugly justify this floundering, nonproductive period of this youth.

Bust your ass to get it, bust your ass to keep it, insure it, cannot use it, and enjoy it!

At first, I thought he was reciting Shakespeare or Chaucer, only later did I understand that he was just pontificating in a plagiarized authoritative British accent.

He looked to me for validation, but I was not quite sure which side I was on. It seemed to me that you have to have had wealth in the first place and given it up in order to take a purist position on minimalism, Taoism, Maoism, socialism, and the rest.

“You’re too possession-possessed,” he blathered one night, as we sat on the floor in his cold two-room apartment eating asparagus and wild rice warmed by a can of Sterno. He didn’t see much need to turn on the electricity. We shared a bottle of homemade wine.

“What?” I said. “Me? I never even owned a skate key. I always had to borrow Roger’s. Did I ever tell you about Roger?” I was wearing knit gloves with the fingers cut off.

He ignored this. Did I ever tell you about Roger? What he did to me?

But none of that mattered to Dick. He didn't want to know. I suffered from skin hunger my whole life. Tony never touched me, or hugged me, or kissed me. He loved me, I knew that, but he was afraid to feel something, anything. With Dick, it was just never enough. I was already too numb. And the hole inside me was like a bloody crater on the moon.

"Possessions tie you down," Dick continued, "and they give you additional responsibility. It's hard enough being responsible for yourself."

"I admire your passion, Dick," I offered, hoping not to offend him, afraid of losing him, falling off the life raft and drowning, "but it would be interesting to be middle class for a while. Just to experience it." I stopped and smiled at him. "For the sake of art, you know, texture. You know, to round out our characters a little. Professionally, I mean. We could own a table, maybe a few chairs. A few candleholders. That wouldn't exactly be selling out."

"Oh, right, middle class ...!" His voice belligerent. Just to annoy me he would push his fork away and devour his meal with his unwashed fingers.

Everyone liked Dick. Even Tony liked Dick, for whatever he was able to extract from uncharacteristic well-mannered conversations during our sporadic weekend visits. And Tony encouraged our marriage in any way he could. He even *almost* offered to pay for it, almost offered to pay for the honeymoon too, one night as he made up Dick's bed on the sofa in the living room. They both guffawed. Just to make sure that I knew they were both kidding, first Tony would wink at me, and then Dick would wink at me.

"You will make someone a wonderful wife," Dick told my father, who had just loosened his stained and splattered apron, and set down a platter of macaroni and hot Italian sausages.

"Meg taught me everything I know," Tony answered, winking at both of us, first Dick, and then me.

But, after years of the military, Dick was not ready to give up his sacred and almighty freedom, his not-needing-anyone status, even though I already lived mostly at his apartment. And I, in my whining soprano voice, at which I had become relatively adept, began to rub his nose in my discontent of his not-needing-anyone-or-anything-especially-a-salt-shaker status by talking about Becky, and Becky and Kevin, their beautiful home, and all their things like cars that actually start most mornings, and some understanding that you will come back, even after a fight, and a modicum of security knowing that there's at least one person out there

in the world committed to looking out for you. And, wasn't it time that we got serious?

It took about a year to finally muster up enough courage to say to Dick, "Listen, Bub, either you're in or you're out." I don't know what would have become of me if he had said, "Count me out!" But he didn't.

WE THREW TOGETHER OUR WEDDING in a couple of days. We had been trained, after all, to put together a good show with not enough time or money, props, or an audience.

Becky and Kevin were unable to attend the wedding. Her mother just passed away, Becky wrote to me on creamy monogrammed vellum. She had no one to take the two babies, or their golden retriever pup—who can blame them? She stated, I'm sure wryly, and there was a leak somewhere in the basement or the attic.

The minister and caterers managed to arrive on time, luckily, and Dick and I pulled off our first independently but coproduced bit of theater without a hitch or a single church rehearsal.

Dick and I joined a troop of actors we met during our travels and we toured all over the country for almost a year, journeyers, doing one-night stands in small towns, parks, and civic centers. We traveled together by bus and at our own expense, while the rest of the troop traveled in an old station wagon with two longhaired dogs, a newborn baby, someone's pet boa constrictor, and all the sets and costumes. It was romantic in the beginning, it really was, like gypsies, but we got paid to perform Shakespeare, and we were all interchangeable because we all knew all of the lines, so after a while, six months or so, I had had quite enough of this sort of life. It was no longer romantic wearing dusty, musty velvet dresses trimmed with stained bows and faded satin insets and wearing those ugly half-shredded brocade slippers that pinched my toes before the first act was half over. I was just tired of living out of a trunk, eating on top of a trunk, moving it from one side of a motel room to the other side and then on to a bus and off again, never able to find anything in it anyway. Everything wrinkled. No ironing board. Tired of being tired of it, and tired of having no stuff. I did have my own pillow, Dick reminded me. But I had enough. I wanted roots.

"Next stop: Poughkeepsie!" Dick whispered in my ear, elbowing me.

"Poughkeepsie?"

"Poughkeepsie, New York," he said slowly.

"New York? You mean it?"

"Yup."

I jumped up, flung my arms around his neck and bolted out the door.

"Hey," he called after me into the cool night air and in the direction of the main house where there was certain to be a public phone. "Don't forget to reverse the charges—we're low on cash."

New York. I couldn't believe it.

"New York, here we come!" I called from the neon-lighted parking space a few hundred feet away. Oh, thank you, God, oh thank you, thank you—

"Yes, Operator. Hello, Becky? Guess what?"

I had been napping on the bus when we reached the bus depot just outside of Poughkeepsie. I awoke from a bad dream, damp and crusty. Incoming Vassar co-eds pushed past and shoved their way off the bus, but I managed to push back a little myself like a bitchy upperclassman demanding my due respect, but I was too tired to talk.

Dick and I arrived at the Poughkeepsie Inn where I began to unpack a suitcase I had carried off the bus only to discover it was filled with several pairs of women's shoes. Very beautiful but sensible shoes, smart, well worn, the shoes of a stylish older woman. At first, we did not know how to react, but finally we both started laughing. I tried them on one pair at a time as if they were accessories from a rented costume. They fit rather well. Better than my own. They were better shoes, European, carefully stitched with leather covered heels. I remember how they felt all broken in and soft. I sat on the edge of the bed and for some reason thought of Nana. Walk in *my* shoes, invited the old woman, for an hour, or a day, or a lifetime. They are big shoes. You think they fit you? Only you can decide.

Dick packed up the bag with haste and exchanged it for mine at the bus depot.

Later, Dick and I went for a walk in the nearby woods, rehearsed our lines, and enjoyed some downtime before the evening's performance. Nature is so different here in the north. I am a foreigner, a tourist in this place called Forest. The curious emptiness, the peace, the great presence of the trees, the intense summer smells, the silence of the birds in the afternoon so pressed on me—I had never seen nature like this—it touched my heart. I had to stop, to breathe and to listen, to catch my breath. The

woods seemed manufactured and artificial. That is how beautiful they were, the tall green trees, the black dirt, and no sand or sea gulls. I gathered some loam and smelled it.

Upstate New York really is to me more beautiful than any invented backdrop. There is a sky against which Lassie could have been painted, noble and romantic with wind-fluffed fur. And if you look beyond, white pansies are everywhere, fluttering like handkerchiefs held in the air, as women gathered and waved good-bye. Then there was the music, strings, like guitars. It was intoxicating, like strings and flutes, or a harmonica. It drifted away. Pollen lingered like mist at dusk. It was intoxicating and stifling. I was lightheaded the whole time.

A stirring noise like a big crowd a good way off was getting closer. I stood up and scanned the empty sky. Suddenly there they were, a wavering V headed directly over our hilltop, quite low through the gap in the trees, a wedge of birds beating southward down the central flyway and talking loudly while they passed. We stayed quiet until the wavering lines were practically invisible in the sky.

Dick pointed to the disappearing bird formation. “Know why one side of that ‘V’ is longer than the other?”

I shrugged. I expected wisdom. I expected a secret from nature.

“More birds.” He laughed, elbowed me, and laughed some more.

I ignored him.

The air was first to show tinges of that deep color purple signaling dusk. The shadows were going purple too, and the yellow earth breathed out some of its lividness. I began to feel queasy. I usually had a nervous stomach before we went on stage. I never told Dick this. I would have to lie down for a few minutes until it passed.

We walked to a clearing. A sliver of moon was coming into focus in the south and the sky was suddenly jittery with pale stars. It was awesome. The complex scent of rich mud and grass washed over me. In the ditches, crickets were purring. I began hearing guitars again in the distance. It added the faintest chorus of male voices and its echo. I listened; Dick watched me—his face a sudden question mark. Distantly I heard a sound of bird song. No, it was a human sound, perhaps kids with a “ghetto blaster.”

Dick said he heard nothing.

Not even those gypsy guitars before?

No.
Nothing?
Nothing.

We crossed over a wooden bridge that arced across a little stream that fed the lake and which, at this point, was leaving it and turning back through an orchard of flowering trees and a flight of stone steps that led up to a garden. Underneath the arches of the hidden arcade was an ancient gazebo decomposing from cold wet nights, blazing hot days, and stacks of old deck chairs, their canvas faded to gray. Here, where art and order should have reigned, nature had, not ungraciously, taken charge. Along the stream, stones were covered with slippery moss and the steps dotted with dandelions. I slipped twice; both times Dick caught me.

Finally we sat by the stream to cool off. Dick drank the spring water.

“This is probably the best water in the world, and it’s cold. Here, taste some. The reservoir is probably right over there.” He pointed in every direction.

I cupped my hands and I brought a dark red liquid to my mouth. Startled, I jumped. Clear water splashed on my feet.

“What’s the matter?” Dick asked, wiping his hands on his denimed buttocks.

For a moment, I did not know where this place was. Dick grabbed my hand and pulled me away from the stream. A mirage. A reflection. Narcissus. Come; let me make wild passionate love to thee ...

We walked a little further along a trail and lay down in hot yellow grass. Dick put a tiny flower in my hair—a pink wild rose. Then he suggested that I was overtired, anxious, premenstrual. Histrionic?

“Don’t forget to breathe.” He always said that, “Don’t forget to breathe.”

I knew the scene. The rose, the stream, the warm yellow grass. Even the smells. All familiar. Scripted and staged. This is a scene in a movie.

We had fifteen minutes to curtain and Dick was winking at me mischievously. He stood off to one side on the small ancient stage in the wing and whispered, “We’re going to the city.” He had gotten a grant, something off Broadway, and it wasn’t a moment too soon. I was so excited about getting our life started that I lost sight of one very crucial fact. I was along for the ride. That doesn’t mean that I didn’t have any value. I did. I just couldn’t put it into words. And if I couldn’t put it into words, what?

Becky and Kevin invited us to stay with them. I was dying to see Becky and I anticipated absorbing all of her charisma and looking through her things. I couldn't wait. She said she couldn't wait to see us. She was so gracious and excited also.

Oh, that would be grand, we agreed, all of us together.

THE WOLCOTTS, AS THEY PROUDLY REFERRED TO THEMSELVES, had just moved into a new home in Sands Point. Seven bedrooms, five bathrooms.

"Imagine. Five bathrooms," I sighed and said.

"Your imagination escapes me," Dick snorted and squirmed to get more comfortable in his sleeping position in his seat. Lush green farms were giving way to more densely populated hamlets on the bus route down into Manhattan.

I silenced my rapture, but really, three acres, a tennis court, a four-car garage, a swimming pool, underground sprinklers, even a gardener and a pool boy that I hoped looked like Troy Donahue. And a part-time nanny. A cleaning service.

I anticipated splendor, the splendor of all those finishing touches, drapes matching upholstery, and a crystal chandelier over a rosewood dining table like the one I had just seen in a production in Albany of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*.

Becky's last letter came on the day we planned to drive down to Long Island. She said she was working on a book, but she did not say what it was about; she added she knew our visit would be full of inspiration and revelations.

I pictured her in a beautiful robe at a large desk littered with onionskin paper, her back perfectly straight and her impeccably manicured fingers pushing the keys of her new IBM electric typewriter.

Writing has too long been thought of as easy work. I admired Dick's ability to grind out typewritten material on a manual typewriter. I liked telling stories, but I did not like typing stories. Could anything be more tedious? I had always been a spinner of yarns, but they got so tangled up that my high school English teacher renamed one of my compositions "Hurrah's Nest." I don't think it was a compliment. So many characters running around in circles, she said.

Finally, I was in Becky's mirrored foyer. We smoked cigarettes and poured aperitifs into tall crystal glasses filled with crushed ice. I gazed repeatedly into her Sub-Zero refrigerator where she would always have something seductive and delicious. Brie and coppacola, aged to perfection, and salmon with capers, marinated artichokes, mushrooms, and smoked oysters.

When we did finally meet up in the foyer we were twenty-something, in our early twenties, and the year was nineteen seventy-something, the early seventies. We hugged one another like children at her front door. Just like long lost sisters.

It was going to be grand.

It promised revolution. And it delivered.