

## TORTURE TECHNIQUES OF NORTH AMERICANS

WHAT WAS EXTRAORDINARY about my brother's face was it was our father's face, all the angles and shadows the very same, asleep against faded linen, the pale sinewy quality of his skin; drawn but shiny from the warmth of the steamed radiator heat. I had slipped into his room on tip toes to hide from my family downstairs, and spent the rest of the morning sitting in a dark corner, my hands clasped around my knees, sleeping Sam's sleep, breathing his breath. His hands were folded over his chest like a corpse and for the longest time, I watched him, still like a stone, as the strange bruised light of a spring storm spun outside the windows.

That morning, a Saturday, had been all about rain; watching rain pour from the sky through windows from every part of the house, as if I had taken on another life as a weather compass, and could chart the storm from its beginnings, first from the east while pulling away with my fingers the webs of sleep, and then from the north. When the sky finally cracked open, I was kneeling on the couch in the far sitting room, my chin resting on the sofa's round, full back, gazing out the bay windows to a slice of Boston Harbor. In the upper corner of the window, the sea formed a triangle where I saw no boats, but rolling white wave tops, and below that, a line of trees, a meadow, and the

broken brick on the patios, the grass not yet strong enough to poke through the cracks.

From there I heard the front door open and close, the splash of rain growing louder between the claps of the door, and then, the sounds of footsteps carrying the swish of water, the rustling of coats. "New York was chaos," my sister Sara, said to no one in particular. "Good God the rain--all the way from Virginia. It is fucking eternal."

On the sill, Mother's orchids were all dead as were the gardenias, though I had saved them with the idea that the few healthy leaves would multiply. I reached out a hand and touched the one shiny gardenia leaf and thought of Sara's hair, the way it folded around the top of her head like upside down petals. "Anybody home?" she called and then a cacophony of more sounds: the slapping of umbrellas and suitcases, the slip and squish of sling back shoes, the knock of a loafer heel, and the rustling of bags of mint condiments and ingredients for apricot glazes.

"Oh, the rain," my grandmother Noonoo singsonged through the house, her yoo-hoo tone underscored by a frightening pop and click of her thin button Parisian shoes, a busy, boisterous step moving from a whine and thump of a butler door, *click click click* over the creaking boards in the dining room and into the hall. "Horrible, my goodness, dear, so horrible but we're all dry here and Samuel's home. Thank goodness Sam is home."

There was a slipping and shaking of coats and kisses. "Thank goodness we're all home" she said again.

"Where's Lulu?" Sara asked.

"Here," I raised my hand in hello. I had just reached the doorway and stopped as my grandmother shot me a disgusted look as she noticed my uncombed hair and what I was wearing: my lost father's underwear, ski socks, and a holey sweater.

"How 'bout some breakfast." Noonoo asked. She turned towards the others, smiling graciously, the enormous lumps of her breasts balancing the old lady hump in her upper back. Her right hand absently reached for a button on the top of her blouse, the bones of her wrist acting like the tongue of a bell for the countless George Jensen bangles and bracelets. "You must be ravished. You've been on the road since dawn."

"You mean famished, Grandmother." Sara smirked. She took her hand and smoothed the skirt of her boiled wool salmon-colored "car" suit. "F o r e v e r. We've been on the road fucking f o r e v e r!"

I recklessly moved into the clot of them, wrapping my arms around Sara and her husband, Bish, together. Sara took my hand and squeezed it as if sending Morse code, while Bish, baby-faced and clean-cut, smiled and rolled his eyes impatiently, wiggling his fingers, the tips shaped like spatulas.

"Hi, Mom," Sara called up the stairs.

"And hello to you," Mother said. She posed at the top of the banister. She posed dramatically, holding one hand above her head; the other poked from her side like a wing. "Sadly, this is all that is left of what used to be your mother."

She laughed and slowly began her descent of the stairway. I watched her negotiate the steps one by one. Mother was truly beautiful. She had enormous blue eyes the color of swimming pools, and almost perfect skin. True, she was still thin, but today she had dressed up, put on some lipstick, and weaved her blonde hair into a French twist. "Who wants breakfast?" Sara asked. "Hey Bishdums," she turned to Bish. "*C'est bien ca pour toi?*"

“Oh, yes,” Noonoo said. She quickly turned to lead everyone down the hall to the kitchen, but stopped for a moment to wait for Mother. “Breakfast sounds good, doesn’t it, Mimi? Let us scramble up some bacon and eggs.”

“Yes, sounds terrific, thanks, Moth-*errrr*,” Amelia said. “Lulu, darling. . . .” she began but I didn’t hear the rest. I was already halfway down the hall, running through the kitchen and up the back stairs where I quietly snuck into Sam’s room where I spent the rest of the morning watching him, scanning every part of him, searching for any indication that he would soon cease to exist, that, like our father, he too might slip into the sea without a trace.

I tried to imagine where he had been, what it would be like for him to be home after a year in Vietnam, days in the back of an aircraft carrier, and then the airport, driving through the rain in a cab. Logan Airport. Callahan Tunnel. I closed my eyes, and climbed into him, to circle the world with him, swimming through shots of white sky from the airplane, *whoppa, whoppa*, I could see the pilgrim sign marking the Mass Pike. The dips. The bridges. S.S. Pierce.

“Hey, Sam,” I said trying to wake him.

I knew he heard me because he opened his eyes and rolled over. One hand floated above his body, and then landed, its fingers walked across his chest and dove into the bed, digging for warmth under the weight of the blankets. A radiator whistled and the house shuddered as if free-falling through space. I moved to the foot of the bed to study him more closely. He rolled to his back. His hands reached behind him and wrapped around the spool railing.

“Boots,” he said.

"Boots?" I repeated thinking of Italy and how we both as children learned geography from shapes of the earth, but how boots now meant something else, something worn in war.

The night before I had waited up for him, had greeted him at the door. I had made him hot chocolate in April at three in the morning.

"You should be asleep," he told me.

I had grown since he had gone. I sensed he knew this; I could feel his discomfort. Little sister had tits! and fingernails! and big hair and a pout! By then, I had already been kissed and smoked cigarettes, learned how to touch myself, and be coy.

"Sam?"

He felt a hand on his shoulder and within a second was in the air, knocking the intruder back.

"Sam? You're talking."

He opened his eyes and seeing me, dragged himself up to a sitting position. "Wow," he said passing his hand over his face. "It's you."

Later, he sat smoking with me at the end of the bed wearing his Marine cap much too big.

*Keep a low profile,* he whispered.

*Be unpredictable.*

*Remain vigilant.*

"This is how to survive Easter dinner." He laughed. He was messing with something in between his fingers, studying it and rolling it around in his hands, and it took me a moment to figure out what it was. A Watch? It turned. A statue of a bird? An old coin.

And then I gave him the rundown. "Noonoo's cooking Christmas dinner for Easter because mother transposed the holidays as a joke and Noonoo doesn't dare say anything." I stopped and turned the hat around backwards, and whispered. "Sara has invited all the dead men's wives..Noonoo had Mother hire a new housekeeper, Catherine and she is retarded. Mother told Catherine I might be retarded, too, and now Catherine and I are best friends. Retard friends. Hurrah! Al, her husband, is a veteran and he has emphysema but smokes Pall Malls—one after the other. He has an

oxygen tank and Noonoo is afraid he will blow up the house. Did you know anything about that, I mean, about the fact I am retarded?"

"Oh Jesus," Sam said, lighting another cigarette. "And the others?"

"You know Irene? She has done sewing for Mother. She did the drapes in the parlor. Well, her son, Ron, he was a tunnel man. They were coming. Then Mother told them to stay home. He did too much LSD. He told me that! We were walking in a graveyard across the street from his mother's when Mother and I -- the only time we went anywhere -- dropped off some curtains and he lay down on a grave and told me that. He said, 'Hey kid, have you ever done any acid? And I said, 'Hey no.' 'Too bad, you'd like it.' Then he asked to see my tits."

"Lou," Sam asked.

"Yes? That's why Mother told them to stay home. The tits part. But then she called them to reinvite them again."

"Are you making this shit up?"

"No."

Sam shook his head and looked at his fingers as if they went on forever and I studied him in the same way, memorizing each shadow in his face, the dark places under his eyes, the shape of his nose and eyebrows, the dip in his skull. His hair was gone, his ears big like elephants.

"So tell me, how did you come? You flew around the world?"

"Saigon," he said. "Bangkok. The Philippines. Los Angeles. Boston."

He seemed thinner and older. He looked so much like our father and for that I adored him. The same strident nose. He was so handsome. I knew I would spend my life looking for a boy as handsome as he.

I stood, walked around the side of the bed and sat holding my fingers out indicating I wanted a puff of his cigarette.

"No, no."

"Oh come on, I smoke. I smoke Mother's Kools."

He handed me the cigarette and I demonstrated the technique I had practiced in the mirror, as I had practiced kissing and the way Sara stood, a hip cocked, and a foot in ballet position number five. I blew smoke rings that floated around his head like halos.

On the bedside table lay some of Sam's things--a training manual covered in Marine camouflage, a pack of Camel straights, and a bag of red hashish. He reached for it and broke off a section to put in his mouth and I followed him doing the same.

I was the one who had cleaned Sam's bedroom, vacuumed, and dusted, opened up the radiators. It was a pretty room with two banks of bay windows that overlooked a meadow and further back the sea. By then the rain had tapered off and the sun tried fitfully to break through the gloom. I went to the windows and knocked on the glass. I could feel Sam looking at me but I focused on the sound, knowing it would not travel, but instead fold in on itself.

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Later, I followed him as he floated through the house, slowly, closing my eyes to see what memory would bring. There was something dead about it; a certain hint of decay that indicated what had been would never be again. We walked barefoot along the runners with our eyes closed, moving in and out of the rooms until we found ourselves at Mother's at the end of the hall.

The door was partially open. He knocked gently and heard a cheerful, "Come in."

I stood behind him in the doorway. One candle flickered fitfully in the corner where Mother sat smoking, her face in a red shadow of her ciggie butt.

"Hello darling, Sam," Mother said.

I wondered if he could feel himself stiffen against her sadness. He had seen the worst and though nothing could compare, it was impossible not to feel Father's absence and her sadness. Whereas in war, there were rules, ammunition, and strategies for every encounter, in misery, all was hidden. No battleground, no leaders --only lumps in our throats. Words, not thoughts, but silly words, wandered through me.

*Four ways to conquer fear.*

In his training manual, I had found he had crossed out four and written six: *Morale. Discipline. Esprit de Corps. Proficiency.* He added the two others in a black scrawl: *Preparation. Combat High.* And then something else: *Rain like bullets.*

It was too early; I had eaten too much of the hashish. I was already too stoned.

In a brown darkness, I watched Sam walk towards Mother.

"Oh! Sam. You're home," she laughed. "How did you come? Not through Bermuda, I see."

"No, Mother, not through Bermuda."

"Swell, it's raining."

He stood by her, took her hand for a moment, and then fell to his knees, sitting back on his haunches. I closed my eyes for a moment, and their words floated around.

"Can I have a cigarette?"

"Oh, sure, they're somewhere."

She turned, drawing on her cigarette, making light, and patted the end table next to her, pulling the box up and shaking it, but producing no sound.

"Was it awful? Was it just god-awful? What a question from your mother ..."

She patted the table hunting for cigarettes.

"Can I open the blinds?"

He walked towards the windows, one hand searched for the string, the other lifted one of the slats. A minute later, he twisted the rod and brought the muted light of the stormy sky. His shoulders moved uncomfortably as if her sadness had slipped around him like a lasso.

"When did you get in?"

"Late, late, two or three."

"How long will you stay?"

"Not long."

He looked again out over the back. It was lovely, as lovely as he remembered, but now with spring even more so.

"Your grandmother is driving me mad," she said. "She has bought herself a Christmas goose for Easter Dinner tomorrow the size of a fucking cocker spaniel. The size of a fucking DOG, with all the

fixings, fit for a king, fit for a dead sailor. It's supposed to be festive. Problem is I don't feel like it..."

She stopped and tried to lift herself up out of the chair. Sam gave her his hand and tugged.

"Isn't Easter the day when the dead rise?" she said, walking to the bathroom, where she stood for a minute leaning on the door sill. "Ask Noonoo to be sure to set your father a place at dinner." And then she disappeared behind the closed door.

Sam turned and saw me sitting in the doorway. We looked at each other a long moment, and knowing the same trick lifted ourselves out of our bodies, and floated apart, spending the day, folding in and out of each other's misery, through clicking doors, and in and out of rooms.

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The next morning, I lay awake and imagined my father walk in circles in the hallway, and then disappear around a corner in a blade of light. I heard his footsteps, and then squeezed my eyes closed for a moment to coax along the wispy threads of memory in the same way I sometimes tried to steer the endings of my dreams.

When I opened my eyes again, the light was the color of tin, and it trembled as it moved across the floor. In the year since he had disappeared, I had not been able to conjure his face; only fragments of ghostly movements: a shoe bottom or an ankle disappearing around corners, the hollow sounds of footsteps walking down a wooden dock.

This was my game.

As long as my father face didn't come to me whole, he was still in this world. So, each morning like a prayer I asked the question, is he alive? And each morning when I saw nothing, my answer was yes.

I sank deeper under the covers, inching the blankets up around my shoulders, and tried again to imagine him sitting on the edge of my bed. He remained invisible, but I could smell the memory of him, a clean peppermint smell, and hear his voice, clear and strong as he told me that he was with me still, even as I grew. I would wonder about this forever: How was it that if I could not see him, I could hear him so clearly? Exactly what part of him remained?

Outside, the sky flashed a momentary white before spinning a sash of dark lavenders and grays, almost the

color of tin, across the floor. The wind was nudging a canopy of clouds inland, and though everything was quiet and fine for the moment, I lay waiting, knowing it was only a matter of time before the storm broke and downstairs Noonoo would erupt into loud banging in the kitchen and mad stampeding down the halls. She and Deadly, had been torturing us for days. They had driven down from Boston early in the week, and flew into the house in a gust, smelling of sesame candies and their taxidermist, a queer meld of dirty dog and old straw. They towed a red wagon full of buckets and French cleaning agents. Their mission was to help Mother clean and open the house, making up rooms for Sarah and Sam. The mission was to celebrate the lives of my father and the three others in his crews' with a memorial Easter dinner.

"Time to let these ghosts out!" Noonoo said. She had barely said hello before she began racing around, twisting the windows open, beating the rugs, chasing the dogs up and down the halls. On the third day of her visit, Mother and I hid, spending the afternoon hiding in her bedroom smoking cigarettes and doing crossword puzzles. I sat on the armrest of her chair and worked over her shoulder. Though the room was darkened, the opened door spilled enough light to fill in the boxes and to see her face well enough to know that she hadn't been sleeping, again.

"Will you ever come out again?" I asked.

She patted my knee and smiled. "Of course. Soon, Littlebit." We listened for a moment. The house sounded as if it had been turned inside out, upside down. There was scraping, slamming, crashing, squeaking, and sucking.

"They've been at this for days," I said. "What *are* they doing?"

Two angry trails of smoke streamed into both nostrils and blew out her mouth. "Oh, God," she said. "Torturing us? Still? Why? Who knows?"

She stamped out her cigarette in the ashtray in a brisk angry motion. Suddenly, Noonoo was standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips, clucking.

"My word, Amelia," she said. "Don't you do anything besides sit in that dark room smoking those awful cigarettes feeling sorry for yourself? Good God free!"

Mother turned towards the door and shrugged. Noonoo cupped her ear as if she was straining to hear.

"Nothing," Mother said, flashing a weakened smile. "Nothing, Mother."

The night after Noonoo had arrived, I had heard Mother get up and wander. I tracked her movements by the sounds of ice tinkling in her drink, her breath, and the scratchy sounds of the dog padding behind her as she

moved –halted and slurred-- in and out of clicking doors of the bedrooms, up and down the hallway and stairs, and around the corners. I knew that it was only a matter of time before she wandered into my room like she had so often after Father had gone. Still, when the door opened and she stood silhouetted in the darkness, I felt frightened and held my breath. The floorboards creaked. There was feather-light cracking of foot bones and the dull hollow sounds of her patting the end of my bed. The bed sank with the weight of her body, and she sat motionless and silent for a few minutes. Then, perhaps, sensing me awake, actually spoke as her hand floated to my leg, and then my shoulder.

"I am so sorry," she whispered. "I promise I will do better. I promise."

She had paused and sighed as if listening to something inside her head and I could tell from her uneasy breath that something more was fighting to escape her, and as much as I wanted to know what it was, or perhaps help her extract it as if it were a bone caught in her throat, I lay frozen and wordless, staring out the window to the night beyond.

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Just as predicted Noonoo's banging began on the early side. I pulled on some clothes and found her pacing the kitchen, dressed to the nines, and smelling of Chanel. Large stainless steel pots boiled on the stove and the sounds of hot bubbling were punctuated by soft grunts; part song, part groan. She sipped air in sharp, rapid breaths and chanted under her breath.

*This is how you baste a bird.*

*This is how you make the stuffing.*

*This is how you mash the potatoes.*

*This is how you crunch the cranberries.*

*You must wait for the skin.*

Noonoo was French so she was mostly fancy, sang weird songs, and spoke in such rich, high tones, her tongue wrapped around a thick accent, her singsong sometimes sounded like hooting.

"My darling child, have you ever seen such rain! Where is your mother?"

"Her room?"

"Doing what?"

"I don't know Grandmother," I looked at the clock; it was only nine A.M. "Probably sleeping. It's still early. It's Sunday."

Noonoo grunted, twisting her hands in her apron, and then, garnering large red oven mitts, opened the mouth of the oven, and pulled the goose out. The bird was enormous, Mother was right, the size of a spaniel, and was wrapped in a paper bag, soiled and stained from its juices. She pulled the bag open, and unwrapped the cotton. The bird appeared queerly twisted around, as if it was upside down, but I did not dare mention it.

"Shhhh, merde!" Noonoo turned to me. Her face was flushed and she was slightly out of breath. "We mustn't let them know. Not anyone," she said fussing over the basting. "Not anyone. We mustn't let anyone else know that your Noonoo is a dodo and is cooking the goose bird upside down."

In the kitchen that afternoon, I studied Sara and Noonoo searching for something to embrace as my own yet found nothing. Sara sat on the counter, an old denim apron bunched up around her tiny waist, and scanned a magazine for a recipe, licking her fingers and turning each page with such efficiency, it produced a frightening snap of paper. My grandmother chatted cheerily as she supervised Catherine ironing napkins, which Catherine did quickly. I was mesmerized by the agility of her rounded fingers. She looked at me and smiled as she worked, sensing I was studying her. Everything about her seemed wrong and I imagined it was how people saw me. Noonoo had told me that her mind had just stopped growing, so everything else grew extra. She was a big woman with fat hands, her nails always painted a hot pink and since her nails were cut or bitten down to the quick, the shiny color at the end of her finger always looked like miniature lacquered pigs' feet.

"Bish," Sara called. "Help us, would you darling?"

Bish looked up from his reading from the other end of the room in front of the fire. "Oh no, I don't know the first thing."

"Where's Dudley?" she asked.

"Asleep," I pointed toward the living room where I had seen him earlier asleep in my father's favorite chair, in front of the fire, his thin blue hands resting on his oxygen bottle.

"The words dinner and supper are not interchangeable," Noonoo corrected Catherine. "Dinner is the main meal of the day. In Europe it is always in the middle of the day except when there is formal entertaining. "In America we usually follow mid-day dinner plan only on Sunday," Noonoo lectured Catherine as if this information actually mattered. "Suppers therefore come on holidays or Sundays or after dances or other special evenings."

"I haven't even seen Sam, " Sara said as she slid off the counter. "You would think he would...I should have never invited the others. I don't know what I was thinking and Mother, well I thought she sounded better, but all she had to do was make the order. Why the hell we are going ahead with another *fucking* goose is beyond me. Goose. Blek. It's so fatty."

"Nothing to it, dear," Noonoo said. "It's done." Finis! We'll make the apricots. We'll make scalloped potatoes and splintered beans with almonds. We'll make it with apricots."

Grandmother led Catherine from the kitchen through the butler door to the dining room and around the dining room table and I followed them as she continued her instructions on how to set the table. I was curious if Catherine would be able to remember the setting as if this would give me some indication of the severity of her mental disability and my lack of one.

"This is how you set a table, this is how you do," Noonoo

chanted.

We walked in circles, and I went to the highboy of drawers to pull out the box of silver.

"Catherine and I will do it, Noonoo," I said. Noonoo gasped as if I frightened her and placed her hand momentarily over her heart.

"Oh yes, that's right. You and your mother and those tables. Lulu sets a marvelous table," and she threw open a drawer and began digging through the silver, all of which needed to be cleaned. Noonoo began to grunt her disapproval.

The place cards had been lost and I dug for them, finding a few in the old blanket chests along with silver spoons, butter knives, finger bowls. I needed to find seventeen total, which I did choosing the coat of arms, the one bearing the doomed family crest.

As I pinned place cards at the table, outside in the field. Sam was standing on my pony Marvin. He was wearing his t-shirt that read in fancy letters "I ride a hog. 50,000 policeman can't be all wrong" and my grandfather's World War I battle helmet he must have found in the barn. Grandmother was counting silver in the background and kept shouting, "How many is it? Fourteen? Is it? Then, the missing men. "

"Yes Ma'am Catherine," said again. She had brought out the plates and platters and seemingly millions of crystal glasses.

I wrote every name out according to the list and when I was done I looked up at my grandmother. "And the missing," I asked. "I mean Father? How would you like me to...?"

"My word, my child."

Grandmother had lost count of the silver. "The names, darling.

The names are fine," but I had already written out "in memory of the missing and/or the dead" and flew out the door through the gardens that were no longer gardens, across the bricks covered by a trellis that was falling down and over the lawn sliding through the rails of the fence towards Sam, having so much to say, so much to ask, but when I arrived only asked if he thought it would clear or rain again.

"No," he said, and he pointed to the horizon.

"No?" I said looking up at him. He still said nothing so I buried my face in the pony's neck and took a deep breath through my nose.

"No?" I asked again.

"No," he said. Sam finally sat down and slid off the pony's bottom, putting the helmet on the pony and his arm around his neck.

"Marvin would make a good soldier," he said. "Stands so tall."

When Sam was first away in Vietnam, he wrote letters to Marvin but they were weird and disconnected.

*Dear Marvin,*

*Something has gone wrong.*

*Dear Marvin,*

*In Vietnam everything sucks. The people suck. The trees suck. The rivers suck. The commanders suck. The wind sucks. The water sucks. The food sucks. The guns suck. The Vietnamese suck. The Vietcong suck. LBJ and Ladybird suck. Love, Sam*

*Dear Marvin:*

*I wanted to tell you about all the horses in Vietnam. They are white and very thin, but we soldiers enjoy them immensely because, Marvin, they smile in the face of danger.*

I wanted to ask him about it but I couldn't get my mouth to

open.

"I thought we might hook up the cart, you know and take off," I suggested. "It's early. We could make it to the mill and back again before dark, I think...Have you seen the chapel, the Harrison's chapel for their son?"

He didn't say anything so I just kept talking. "You know we can cut cross through the woods to the folly and follow the carriage paths all the way to the school house and the inn and on our way I can show you the chapel."

Sam just stood on top of the pony with his eyes closed and his hands out.

"Marvin's good, too. Her doesn't run off like he used to."

Sam still wasn't saying anything so I buried my face in the pony's neck and took a deep breath through my nose.

"Remember how hard the harness was, but I've been good about keeping the leather. It's all fixed up."

Sam finally climbed down or rather, sat down and slid off the pony's bottom.

"Sounds good, I suppose," he said, coming around to where I was standing. "You sure you know how."

"Yes, I'm sure. I do it all the time."

"The new cart is the best because it's a box and I have collected all sorts of pillows and a mat." I walked ahead and continued to chatter. "So you can lay down. The only thing is there's a section where the gate is too narrow and we have to lift it, but it's not hard. It's not that heavy."

I turned back and looked at Sam, knowing something was wrong, but there was nothing I could say or do, so I talked. He had put the helmet on the pony and was walking with his arm around him and this for some reason was a comfort to him. Sara was different than us though I never understood why. She just seemed more capable whereas Sam and I seemed capable of nothing.

We walked down the field and around the barn where I dug out the harness. It was true I had spent an inordinate amount of time cleaning and oiling tack. As Mother grew drunker and drunker, I lost myself in the warm smells of softening leather, Neatsfoot Oil, and saddle soap.

My brother climbed into the cart and after I checked the final buckles and made sure the reins went through their proper brass hooks; I climbed in also and snapped the reins. We went out the back gate that led to a grassy lane where I cut across a field and into an area we called the flats. It was beautiful, wet from the spring rains but I hoped my brother felt good with me. I didn't know anything about war, about Vietnam, but he seemed strange and even then as a little sister, I worried. I talked and talked out of sheer nervousness as I showed him all my secret places in

the wood including the tiny chapel made for the Harrison's son who had died of leukemia five years earlier. Quentin was a schoolmate and exactly my age, and his death remained mythological, and often pulled me back here to this chapel, imagining his dead body, trying to peer in all the windows.

It wasn't very long; we hadn't even reached the main roads when I turned and noticed Sam was sound asleep. In those days, the old carriage paths didn't always connect so there was some road to cover but it was country road, some still cobblestone, not the large cobblestone, but small button sized pebbles that created a buzz of the cart wheels. I cut past Edmunds Road and turned up the old Wayside Inn Road, past Mary Had A little Lamb's schoolhouse, and past the old Inn where George Washington had slept and cut into the carriage paths that led to Ford's Folly, the dam that Henry Ford had built that didn't work, which would lead us out to the old Boston Post Road. By the time we reached the Folly, Sam was awake again and fumbling in his pockets for cigarettes, which he had forgotten.

"Shit," he said. He shifted the pillow behind him in order to sit up. I snapped the reins to get the pony moving which was now possible on the dirt paths. We turned the corner and could make out grey sections of the stone of the dam through branches and vines of overgrowth. Though the dam wouldn't hold as it was meant to, it did capture some stream waters in the early spring so it was possible to dive off.

"Hey, what do you say we go swimming?" He slowly pulled himself out of the cart and walked across the top of the dam and disappeared. I stood with the pony for a moment thinking he might return. When he didn't, I tied up the pony and walked out, dizzy with the height. Sam stood at the end of the dam.

I followed the trajectory of his eyes and saw the top of Nobscott Hill and an old radio tower in the distance.

"But it's freezing," I said. "Is it deep enough to jump?"

Sam didn't say anything. Within an instant, he had his jersey and pants off and stood in front of me in his underwear, bony and white and that's when I saw the marks on his legs, and a few on his arms around the inside of his elbow. "We shall see," he laughed knowing I was nervous. I looked at the marks again and back at him thinking he might volunteer an explanation of bug bites or bad cigarette games, but he said nothing. He turned back at me, smiled and then, walked off the edge of the dam.

I heard a splash and then nothing so I sat down and inched my way to the edge and peered over expecting to see him come to the surface but he didn't. I waited a moment later and thinking the worst broke into a run across

the dam and into the woods, down the embankment towards the water below. There was no path so I went straight through the trees, slipping with the wet earth and losing my balance went head first into the earth, scraping my legs against some rocks on the embankment. When I came up, Sam stood at the far end of the pond, laughing.

"Just testing," he said. He was standing on a rock at the opposite edge, his arms crossed over his stomach and holding onto his sides.

He laughed again. "Shit that was funny. You should have seen it."

"I don't think it's so funny. I beat up my leg and my head." I rolled over to my back and tried pulling my pants up to see the front of my leg where it stung, but the blood from the top of my head began streaming down my face, and I grew dizzy. I frantically began to look for a place to pull myself up, but didn't see any.

"What is it?" Sam asked. I looked at him once and tried to tell him I needed help but before the words came, I began to fall down the side of the hill into the water where upside down, I sank. I felt the water above me, and the soft earth below, and in a shot, something pulled. Sam slapped me hard and I took a breath, coughing a few times and then began to sob, as if something been dislodged. Sam put his arms around me and I could feel his body heave once, "You're okay," he said. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You're fine."

But I wasn't fine, and he knew it. I cried forever. He wrapped me up in one of the blankets and drove the pony home.

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Something awful had happened to Sam. This is what I was thinking as I watched him rocking his head back and forth smiling like a mental patient. It was early evening and we were sitting on the bottom steps of the hall stairway, both squashed into Easter garb and military regalia waiting for the guests to arrive. I studied his teeth and all I could see was my father, his china whitemishapened teeth like Grandmother's Porcelain soup spoons from China, with edges that were translucent like leaves of mica. When he noticed me studying him, he pushed his lips together.

"Smile," I said. Sam tightened his lips even more, refusing, and then leaned back on his elbow, took a deep breath, closed, and opened his eyes quickly as if, like Sara, he was sending a secret code. Everything about him had grown mysterious and splintered since Vietnam.

"When we torture, we torture in times of war," he whispered. I turned to him, uncertain as to what he actually had said, until he said it again. "We torture when threatened by imminent attack and at other times of particular duress such as..." he leaned back, and like a cowboy, pulled his hat over his eyes, "family gatherings, celebrations and religious feasts."

"We torture happily," he continued, "with silence and smiles. We release no prisoners..." he paused as if trying to grab a thought.

"Take it down," he said, sitting forward, smiling his weird half-smile and pointing to the baby blue spiral bound notebook after we got home from the folley that he had given me with specific directions to approach Easter *post daddy-o*, his term, with an anthropological eye, "as if," he added, "Lou, you were gathering information for the enemy."

*What enemy?* I thought.

I studied our reflections in the mirror across the room. We appeared surprisingly patriotic for Easter, he handsome in uniform and the little girl beside him, me, with a grown-up body in a grown-up red dress, low cut with a tight bodice. My reflection was foreign; I didn't feel part of it but betrayed by what I had become, all curves and weirdo desires.

He blinked quickly again, and I leaned over to look at him. "Really," he said. "Write it down. You could write poetry like the Mumster."

His eyes were blasted, red and distant, and he was grinning again because the music had changed. Mother was singing songs from *Easter Parade* with Deadly accompanying her on the piano. I craned my head

around the corner, and through the other rooms I could see the back of Deadly, dressed in yellow trousers and a green sweater with a whale belt. He had a big nose like LBJ, and his silver hair was slicked back. Beside him stood Mother, in a simple and beautiful black crepe dress and bare feet. Pulling a favorite joke of my father's she was wearing Grandpa Winslow's lampshade of the world as a hat.

They were attempting some medleys: *We're a couple of swells. We Stay in the Best Hotels. You Made Me Love You, It's So Nice To Have a Man Around the House.* Of course, Mother knew the music, but Deadly could only pick out parts of the harmony and the chorus, so all we heard was a mishmash of piano discord wafting towards us, followed over and over by the chorus again, which he had down, even though it was a little off-key and plodding.

"There must be something someone could do ...with this ...peculiar place," Sam said again. By then the music came to a halt so it was easier sailing for a few moments giving me ample time to turn to Sam, look at his teeth and very carefully count freckles, each speck of color in his calico eyes and jot it down in my notebook. *Teeth like Dad. Twenty-two freckles, chestnut, squarish and round in appearance, I wrote. Eyes like a cat, yellow, green, brown, red.* I stopped when I heard the thumping of angry feet belonging to Sara who stormed by us carrying a huge platter of oysters. "Answer the door," she said. "Just don't sit there. Open the fucking door."

*Torture sister: Roll eyes, stamp feet.*

Sam jumped up, ran down the last few stairs, around the corner and through the hall to open the door, but I stayed put for a minute.

*Torture Grandma Noonoo: Stop brushing hair. Swear. Talk about about Grandpa falling off the deck into the lake after too much bourbon; how the French smell because they never bathe.*

In the distance, I could see a wad of laughing guests circle towards the house.

"Welcome," Sam said and after a series of *oohs* and *ahhs* in came Tweety Lawrence, Gussy Anderson, and Happy Kendall, all widows of my father's crew, their gold bracelets and travelers clinking, with bright shiny painted faces and shocking pink lips, dressed in full holiday gear, minks and fur hats, and companions, all younger or so it appeared. In the months following the boat's disappearance, they all had pretty much let loose, and even at this early afternoon hour, everyone appeared smashed.

"Wow! Look at you Louisa!" Tweety said. "All grown up!" A small bony hand grabbed my wrist, and she pulled me down the stairs towards her to get a better look. I was tiny and though never beautiful; I had been told I was handsome like my father, small boned and skinny and with a head full of long curly auburn hair that I had refused to brush or iron so it fell around me in unruly disarray. "George! For Christ's sakes," she yelled and then turned back to me. "The eyes, I see it especially around the eyes."

In an instant, wafts of Chanel and Shalimar and the smiling faces of the others came into focus "Absolutely marvelous," Happy bellowed as she handed me her coat. "Louisa, you look absolutely... You must know Shim, you're neighbors."

"Sure does," he said, grabbing my hand and crushing my fingers.  
"We're old over the fence friends Louisa and I."

"George," Tweety said again. "George, Happy!" She stood beside me, and plucked an end of my hair, extending it and straightening the curl and then letting it go so it snapped back into place. "Just look at her! The spitting image of Dan."

George smiled and waved, but kept his eyes on Sam. Though he was more Sara's age and had actually dated her one summer, he and Sam had gone to Faye Country Day School together, and had been friends long ago.

"Can I get anyone a drink," I asked. "Mother's made a delicious punch."

I admit it sounded strange coming from me and both George and Sam turned and laughed, but George's eyes lingered a moment.

"Let me reacquaint myself with Miss Lulu," he said to Sam who smiled quickly and then shot me an evil eye as George sashayed over and placing a hand on my hip, pulled me close. Too close.

"Yahoo, Louisa, Sam you never told me that Tiny Louisa was not so tiny anymore." He leaned over and kissed me on the lips.

"My word, George, now," Tweety laughed, pushing his shoulder with a tiny hand. "Let us not start stealing children."

"Look who's talking," George said, squeezing a little harder.  
"Mrs. Robinson. Does Louisa look like a child to you?"

"She looks just like her father," she said.

I wiggled out of George's grip to take coats. "So good to see you, Louisa." Gussy smiled as she sailed by, turning back, cocking an ear. "Tell me, sweet Jesus, is that your mother?"

"Yes." I smiled. By that time, the entertainment had switched thankfully to Barbra Streisand's *I Stayed Too Long at the Fair*, a song Deadly actually knew.

When all had disappeared, Sam walked up the hallway stairs and without turning back, stopped, walked backwards down the stairs and a few steps further so he faced me. "Watch Georgy Poo," he said, winking, and continued forward on his way up the stairs, but knowing I watched him, he raised his arms to his sides as if they were wings and made a buzzing sound with his lips, soaring around the corner like a plane.

I turned to run the coats and hats up stairs to my room, each fur shiny and the same color, a chocolate brown, smelling of strange exotic scents of expensive perfume. I lay them all out on the bed and pushed my hands in their pockets finding embroidered hankies, kid gloves with rabbit fur insides and wads of pink Kleenex that smelled of lipstick and powder. After writing it down under camouflage and concealment, Sam's categories, I sat for a moment and looked out the window. Until that weekend, it seemed the house been empty for years and I felt a sense of relief to finally have its walls full of people, drunk, yes, singing, yes, but nevertheless present. Outside, the sky was filled with the colors of spring, the sun breaking through a dense white and watching it, I smiled a little thinking about my mother's explanation of Easter when I was small. *It's when Jesus rises his ass up from the dead*, and then she popped the round of her palm against her forehead

and laughed her strong bright laugh, a laugh that lingered, and told me there was still a part of her somewhere whole.

A deep voice interrupted me.

"A Pensive Lulu... Dreaming of better days, I presume. I like that."

I turned and saw George in the doorway, holding his coat out. He was handsome in a movie star kind of way. No one should be as handsome as George and this afternoon, he was dressed in thick preppy corduroys and a black sweater, very different from dirty dungarees and a torn up T-shirt.

"You look very pretty sitting there," he said. "Do you know how pretty you are?"

"Not really, I mean I don't know that. It's not something... It must be. I mean I don't wear dresses. Usually."

I stood quickly, embarrassed at being caught in a private moment, humiliated that I knew nothing about words or interacting with anyone except my friend, Mack.

"You forgot..." He held out his coat again and walked towards me with a strange look on his face, his eyes not moving from me.

"Sit for a minute with me," he said. "Tell me how you are?"

I took his coat from him and placed it on top of the others and we sat on the edge of the bed, facing a bank of windows looking out over the backfield.

"What's to tell?" I said.

"How are you? Well, there must be something."

"Nothing, really."

I felt nervous suddenly and breathless. He put his hand on my knee and then squeezed my thigh and my face grew warm as if my thigh was directly connected to my head by a switch.

"Strong legs."

"From riding," I said.

"Bareback?"

I nodded, not knowing what difference it would make to anyone how I rode, especially somebody like George. I took my eyes off my feet, looked at him quickly, and saw his eyes, dark and steely, gaze at me. His hair was long, tied back in a ponytail and he had an earring in his left ear, a simple gold ring with a helix of wire for a clasp.

He placed his hand on my cheek. "You're blushing."

"It's warm, I think."

I stood up and turned to him. He grabbed my hand and held me still.

"Have you ever been kissed, Louisa?"

"Yes. Sort of."

My head suddenly emptied. No one had ever asked me this. No one, certainly no friend of my older brother had ever given me any thought at all.

"Is it a terrible thing that I'd like to kiss you."

"Yes. I think it might be terrible."

"Why would that be so terrible?" He smiled, teasing.

"Well, because you're older, certainly, and our fathers were friends and are probably dead, too. Then there's Mrs. Anderson. You're escorting Mrs. Anderson, and it occurs to me that it is probably not

proper to be escorting a woman like that -- a friend of your mother's -  
- and upstairs kissing me. It doesn't seem like a proper...you  
know...whatever...it's probably illegal."

All the words in the world have disappeared and I stared at the  
floor, counting cracks in the wood. Everything seemed dirty and too  
big. Too much furniture. Too much flesh. Too many breaths.

"Proper?" George laughed. "What could be more proper? " He stood  
and tugged at me and when I looked up at him, my eyes moved to his lips  
which seemed an unnatural red, as if he were wearing lipstick, and I  
thought about how it might feel to kiss him, but I had never kissed  
anybody but my friend Mack, and even though we had explored everything  
about a kiss, standing up, sitting down, lying in the grass, it was  
clear to me then, we were children, silly girls.

"You would like me to kiss you. You'd like that, wouldn't you," he  
said, pulling me closer.

"No, not necessarily," I said, pulling back enough to maintain an  
uneasy tension.

I felt a finger circle the palm of my hand and I suddenly felt  
this weird sensation in my chest, as if I was completely exposed to  
air.

"How about dancing? Dance with me."

"There's no music."

"You know how to dance. I'm sure you were tortured like the rest  
of us down there at the Village Hall."

He pulled himself up and me towards him in one motion and within an instant, I felt the warmth of his hand against my back and the other, a little circle of warmth further up.

"This is not how you dance," I said.

"Oh, yes . It is. Believe me. I know what I'm doing." When he wiggled into me and pressed his lips against mine, it was clear he did know what he was doing and I didn't, but somehow I followed. It was all without thought, but with breath and darkness because I closed my eyes. He then moved me into the bathroom in one pull and then shut the door and kissed my neck and the tops of my breasts and my ears with his lips and his tongue and this was different than anything I ever knew, but urgent, purposeful and wet. He pinned me against the wall and ran his hands all over me and I heard his breath and whisper, "you feel so good, so good" and what was happening was so odd I refused to open my eyes and instead concentrated on the colors and bursts of purple clouds exploding into a perfectly green sea. I began to laugh but the laughter suddenly turned and tears streamed down my face. "I'm sorry," I said, sputtering.

"Whoa. Whoa." He held my face between both hands and kissed my eyes and nose and mouth. "Come on. It's okay. Open your eyes."

I refused.

"Open."

I felt his finger prop open an eye and I began to laugh again.

He stopped and smiled. "There," he said, adding one more sweet kiss on my nose. "You can think about that while we celebrate the

rising of Christ" and opened the door and slipped out leaving me looking at myself in the mirror alone.

Downstairs the music continued and I listened as I stared dumbly through the mirror no longer seeing myself or anything else because everything was swirling with a jagged, empty excitement that felt like fear, or perhaps something else, as I wondered about what had just happened, and what I might have to do to make it happen again.

Before I went down to join the others, I picked up my notebook and continued my assignment.

*Four ways to conquer fear, I wrote: Kiss. Tongue. Breathe.*

*How to torture the enemy: Lie and smile. Lick.*

I hid the notebook and walked down the back stairs. I had stopped to gather myself at the bottom stair and I could hear the others in the kitchen. Noonoo made small grunting sounds, followed by a series of small inhalations of disgust. The oven door whined and thumped as someone began pulling dishes out with a frightening efficiency. Noonoo grunted again. I imagined her wiping her hands on her apron, as she moved to the oven to pull out the apricots and creamed sherry corn and the beans and the scalloped potatoes.

"Where's Lou?" Sara asked. Her heels clickclicked as she walked to other side of the kitchen. The butler door made *thwapping* sounds as it swung. "Lou! Louise."

I took off my shoes and quietly tiptoed up the stairs in the other direction, past the second floor to the third floor, where there was a maid's quarters and my father's office. I opened the door and stepped inside. All the sounds grew into themselves as if I had just dipped my head under water. Everywhere I looked, all I could see was where our lives left off.

On the east wall overlooking the sea was half Wainscoting, and crank paned windows. On the west, squat built-in bookcases were stuffed with books about medicine, plants, and the sea. In the corner sat an antique oak desk and everywhere else rolled maps in the corners, a telescope, ship clocks, and barometers. Nothing had changed since he had gone. I sat in his leather chair, picked up his half-smoked pipe left in an ashtray, lit it, and looked out the window. The clouds thickened and darkened blurring the horizon's edge into an inky smudge. On the shore I saw him laughing, standing barefoot in the distance, his blue pants rolled up to just below his knee, holding his blue boat sneakers. *By golly, Lulu, it's drunk out. That's right. It's drunk in the boathouse. Your mother should be pleased. The best compliment to a host!*

I pushed myself up against the window, winding the crank to open it to get a better look. As the window opened out, the sea came in with a gust. Its smell was deep and rusty, but without the glass between us, my father's image faded. In the year since his boat had disappeared, I hadn't been able to conjure his face: only fragments of ghostly movements. I often imagined I saw the back end of him walking the hallway and then disappear around a corner in a blade of light.

I heard his footsteps, and squeezed my eyes closed to coax along the wispy threads of memory in the same way I sometimes tried to steer the endings of my dreams. I tried to imagine him sitting at his desk. He remained invisible, but I could smell him, a clean, peppermint smell, and hear his voice, clear and strong, as he told me that he was with me still, even as I grew. I would wonder about this forever: How was it that I could hear him so clearly? Exactly what part of him remained?

I opened my eyes and feeling the cold, he returned. This time his face was there in its entirety, so close I could see drops of sweat roll off his forehead and my breath caught in my chest as I saw the bubbles that formed under his tongue pop and vanish when he laughed. I

looked again and he was gone. I cranked the window closed, and when I turned around, Sam stood quietly in the doorway.

"I sometimes see him," Sam said. "In the strangest places, as if he isn't really gone. You know he is, don't you? I don't know what people have told you about it."

I moved behind the desk and sat down. I didn't know what to say. I had fallen into such a dreamland of grief, it seemed I carried broken pictures of Father everywhere.

Sam sat on the other end of the desk, fiddling with something he had found in one of the baskets.

"They found the boat," he said. "Right after they went missing. There was no one in it. It was just sailing along. Empty. And then, there he is sitting beside me."

Sam stood and shot his arms to his sides like wings and buzzed around the room. "I drive those planes, Lou, the little bird planes that lead those massive bombers along the border, and there he is. There is our father sitting beside me. He is always there."

He sat again and laughed, and then put his head in his hands. His body rose and fell sharply. "I miss the alive him," he said. "The world is so fucked; he was the only thing that made any sense here."

I watched Sam a little more as he quieted, and then looked around the room, and at the windows. I had spent a year and a half imagining every scenario, but I had never allowed myself to imagine the end. It seemed it was my game; a game of hope. As long as I couldn't see my father whole, I could tell myself he was still alive, but sitting there with Sam, the pieces of this world were moving all around again,

and I felt our father so strongly as if he was there, as if he were with us. Dead but within.

We made our way down the main stairs through the hallway into the dining room. Noonoo and Sarah had dressed Catherine in a maid's outfit that looked too tight. On the sideboard, the goose cooled upside down, as the dinner guests seemed to float around the house dreamily as if under water. By six, when dinner was announced, the guests drifted about happily for another quarter of an hour wearing smirks on their faces teetering on the brink of a fiasco, every movement indicating some sort of chaos was potentially at hand. When people finally began to take their places behind their chairs, I noticed the placecards had been changed; George was beside me.

The room was long rather than wide with fat planked wooden floors, a very large walk-in fireplace, a table that could sit twenty, and French doors leading out to a terrace in the back. The heavy chintz curtains of red hens happily sitting in bowls surrounded by strawberries, looked over the afternoon guests, and conversations wandered. The wallpaper, almost transparent, lay against a discolored plaster, the wisps of a burlap-colored fibers looked like they were applied individually by hand. Behind me, there was the constant thump of the butler's door and on the opposite wall two archways on either end leading into the hallway. From where I stood, I looked out to the hallway and great grandmother Winslow's bureau and a lamp made from an old hunting decoy of a mallard duck. If I turned to the left, there was a painting of a brilliant angry sea from a bluff south of here,

and further through the French doors, a broken brick terrace with half-moon gardens of yellow tulips. It was particularly pretty this afternoon. Sara had added accents of silver bowls with fruits and flowers. Candlelight twinkled in the half-light of stormy skies, which cast a queer glow on all finery. We all wore smiles, in spite of it all, and for once for a brief gleaming moment, it seemed a future was possible.

I stood between Sam and George, but was trying my best to ignore George, which took all the energy I had at that moment because although I wanted to look at him and perhaps kiss him again, I felt strange about wanting this. I was also embarrassed because I knew he had changed the settings around. He was so much older than I, and I knew he had many girlfriends, and was to be a doctor like my father, but an anesthesiologist, someone had said, or a pathologist, and it was all inappropriate and as I thought about all this the air between us became electric, expanding and contracting, hot, and cold.

We had set another table for the lost men in the corner by the French doors, though their place settings had originally mingled among the others making it too large at eighteen, Sara had literally stamped a foot like a bull and shouted, "No, absolutely not!" She raised her hand flat out in front of her like the Supreme's *Stop in the Name of Love* to indicate "no argument!" "It is too fucking weird," she said, "much better with an even, a lucky fourteen, and how really," she placed her hand on her hip in exasperation. "We don't want to depress the guests anymore than they already are."

She had covered a small card table with a cloth of faded linen

and set four places facing the center of the table and a glass vase full of white tulips. The glassy surface of the red wine in the goblets reflected a flickering candle flame set in the center of the dinner plate.

We remained standing while Mother made a grand entrance, silent but smiling, like a movie star, with the squat but lovely lampshade with a map of the world on her head. Everyone watched her gravitate to the lost men's table. I had held my breath waiting for her to drop to the floor like Scarlet O'Hara, but she passed by, smiling and raising her hand in a little wave like a queen. She pushed her hand behind her, and wiggled her fingers as if she were waving to something in a rearview mirror.

After more commotion because of some missing chairs when I overheard Shim say a million times, "Well Haps, that's just ducky," Sam helped mother noisily attempt to sit, the chair legs scratching against the wooden floor where the rug did not meet. Then, as I sat down, a shower of questions began shooting at me from across the table from Happy and Gussy, their perfectly painted peach and raspberry colored fingernails grasping their placeware: *How is the Farm School these days? Did they ever find the funds for that new building? What ever happened to that Mr. Kean? Wasn't he a delight? And George, who is that charming new headmaster of the new girls school? I heard he came up from St. Margaret's in Waterbury is it? He was fired, took half the school. You know George is teaching at St. Mats.*

After each question, they whispered and laughed. I answered yes, no, and isn't it? I don't know while I felt George's eyes sizzle

through me.

*Three ways to survive Easter dinner: Keep a low profile. Remain vigilant. Be unpredictable.*

*Esprit de corps, Discipline, Proficiency, Combat high.*

George's younger brother and sister, Dan and Jessica Kendall, were at the other end of the table on the other side of George. I had said hello when I saw them come in, but just like last summer, they were so painfully shy they just looked at their feet. I turned towards George and then away, fixing my stare on Happy to see if I could find the beauty my father had seen in her for he always told me that she was once a real beauty queen. She was the opposite of Mother; soft spoken and elegant like an exotic bird; dark shiny hair, fair with steely eyes and tall and slight, always wearing a bemused expression as if she had just heard a titillating tidbit about somebody's sex life. She laughed again and I realized if it were up to me, she was beautiful and would be the woman that I would have picked for my father. She took Shim's hand, her bracelets jingling and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek and I half-expected to hear, "Gee whiz, Haps, that's just ducky."

To the left of Happy was Irene, the seamstress, who had a sad face like a moon and puffy bleached hair around it that looked like golden clouds. Between her and Mother, at the head of the table, stood her son, Ron, the tunnel man, who stared at the floor. Through the course of the dinner, he mumbled. His voice was low and so quiet, he sounded like a grinding sick motor.

"Do you need drinks?" I asked them. The others were sucking at

their punch glasses, but these poor souls remained empty handed. Irene looked up at me and smiled, but said nothing.

"Wine," Ron said. "Fine."

"Good lord," Sara finally said with an air of self-satisfaction. "I do believe we have it all together." She wrapped her hand around Gussy's forearm and squeezed it in a secret gesture I had seen older women share before. She then laughed her hollow-people-are-watching-me laugh while making a fast and fastidious study of the table, mentally calculating the number of serving bowls to make sure everything that was supposed to be present remained present. She leaned over whispered something to Gussy, raising her shoulders when she laughed in the same manner my father had and I wondered if there was anything like that of my father in me.

Bish stood at the head of the table and cleared his throat.

"Outdone yourselves, as usual. I do believe this calls for a toast." He raised a glass and everyone followed. There was clinking, and it was beautiful with the light of the candles flickering around disembodied faces floating in the curves of the swaying goblets.

"I should say," Gussy agreed with a nervous twitch of her eyes which every once awhile she would bat very quickly and then stare blankly ahead as before.

"Yes," Tweety said in her tweety bird voice.

"Here here," Deadly said. "To the hostesses. To the beautiful Sulla," he nodded to my grandmother, "Her lovely daughter, Amelia." I looked across the table and Sara narrowed her eyes like lasers. "Sara and last but not least Little Louisa." Everyone raised their glasses

again, and touched glass to glass down the table and took their chairs. Sam remained standing, however, and raised a glass to the missing.

"To the others," he said, but he did so strangely and haltingly, not looking at anyone but at his plate.

Traditionally in our family, my father sang a sailing ballad, a very old one, before holiday meals. He had loved to sing, and I suppose if there was anything sweet about my family it was music, so when Sam began the song, Mother, Sara, and I joined in to sing "Drifting," one of Dad's favorite ballads. I moved to stand behind Mom and remember seeing China on her hat before closing my eyes and singing the melody while she and the others mostly hummed the harmony not remembering all the words.

*Till my soul is full of longing  
for the secret of the sea  
and the heart of the great ocean  
sends a thrilling pulse through me.  
my soul today  
is far away  
sailing the fair New England Bay;  
my winged boat  
a bird afloat  
Sails round the purple peaks remote.*

*Round purple peaks  
It sails, and seeks  
Blue inlets and their crystal creeks  
Where high rocks throw  
Through deeps below  
A duplicated golden glow.*

*I heed not if  
My rippling skiff  
Float swift or slow from cliff to cliff—  
With dreamful eyes  
My spirit lies  
Under the walls of Paradise*

*Under the walls*

*Where swells and falls  
The Bay's deep breast at intervals,  
At peace I lie,  
Blown softly by,  
A cloud upon a liquid sky.*

*The day, so mild  
Is heaven's own child  
With Earth and Ocean reconciled,  
The airs I feel  
Around me steal  
Are murmuring to the murmuring keel.*

*Over the rail  
My hand I trail  
Within the shadow of the sail,  
A joy intense,  
The cooling sense  
Glides down my drowsy indolence.\**

When I finished, I opened my eyes and saw Bish at the end of the table, Sara, and Noonoo sitting on either side, each face empty, accompanied by a stunning silence. I could only think that I had sung too loudly, or poorly, but Sam took my hand and smiled. "That was beautiful, Lou. Really."

But as I looked at the others; Deadly was expressionless. Next to him, Tweety wore the same smile as always, the skin on her lips stretched tight. George, seated next to my empty place began to clap as I watched the others pull their hands up and slap their fingers daintily.

Dinner was served by Deadly and Sam with Catherine handing the plates back and forth. Before digging in, Mother went on a diatribe about the Irish, and down at the end of the table, Noonoo whined about how one couldn't find good help these days and went down the list: The

younger French maids never bathed, the Irish drank too much, and the colored ones were d.u.m.b.

Meanwhile Sara was on about the Navy society in Georgia, how boring the navy wives were and who was coming out, who had been invited to the Cotillion, and neighborhood gossip including the Wilcox boy who had shot himself in the heart, and Thelusa Lawrence who, after ten years of surviving Polio, finally suffocated on her iron lung.

And then the table went dead when Mother asked about Happy's recent stint in jail because of drunk driving.

"Glorious, and life changing, thank you," Happy said without missing a beat. "At least what I remember."

Sam and Manny talked about Vietnam, where they were stationed, and there were other pieces of conversation floating by me. There was chat about the Grey Nuns leaving the old Stone mansion, and being replaced by the new free school like Summerhill. It then came out that Sara had told Bish that Dad was an admiral in the Navy and he wasn't even in the Navy, which Sam pointed out, and the conversation continued to Donald Loker's new pig, and all the while this was happening, George very discreetly moved his hand between my legs, hidden under miles of table linens while he held some kind of discourse about his short time in medical school before being thrown out for punching one of his instructors because of his politics about Vietnam. Of course, talked turned to my father and the others, but there wasn't any additional information. The boat was found, but their bodies were not. There was a storm, well, yes a storm, and I calmly but firmly and discreetly removed George's hand from my lap.

"It's hell there, north of the island," George said, taking a mouthful. George was the only one present who had ever sailed at all seriously and had once even crewed the Bermuda Race.

"It's not impossible by a long stretch but coming into the island is tricky from the north," he said. "The boat capsized and then...?"

At dessert, I stared at Mother's hat of the world, so throughout apple pie and Grandmother's plum pudding I was consumed by the Great Lakes until the Lakes suddenly took flight; Lake Michigan, a droopy penis on the wings of Lake Superior and Huron, and there on Mother's head of lakes, my father stood in the center, his feet just below the water line, long strings of seaweed in his ears and with each triumphant wave and clink clink of wine glasses and humphs and guffaws of our drunken dinner guests, he seemed to grow further away on the horizon line as if carried by the storm that was blowing off the water outside our windows. The tips of the islands, usually visible from this room, hid in the fog, then reappeared and hid again as the storm grew stronger, and the rain grew louder, pounding against the terrace and the windows of the house and below the hum of conversation, I could hear George, next to me, whisper something, his fingers searching the secrets of my lap. I turned and looked at him, felt the air between us expand and contract, fluttering like bird wings, the contrast of his dark hair and his fair skin stealing my breath, and knowing nothing of this game, smiled. His left hand, hidden under the dinner linens, moved deeper in between my legs, and though I was overcome by an urge to open all the windows and let the rain come in, I instead turned towards my mother and the lakes on her head, and

moved my gaze slowly down to the tip of Lake Michigan and a city named Chicago.

"Mother," I said. "What is that song about Chicago?"

George's hand stopped.

"Chicago, Chicago," she sang, "that doddering town."

"Doddering," Sam laughed. "You mean toddling."

"You say Doddering? I say Toddling," she sang waving a hand in the air. "Let's call the whole thing off."

George pulled his hand away and when I looked up, a young woman stood in one of the archways. "Yoo-hoo," she said. "Your interloper is here."

A minute passed as the table turned around in their chairs.

"Hello darling," Happy said. Brook reached down and kissed Happy on the cheek. "Everyone, meet George's fiancée: Brookes Fieldhouse from Wellesley."

The next thing I knew George stood beside her with his arm around her waist kissing her on the cheek. "We could barely go on without you," he said. "Hadn't I just said that, Louisa? I couldn't go on without her?"

I nodded and out of the corner of my eye I saw Sam, who must have known all along, but no matter how hard I tried to turn my head towards him, I couldn't get it to move. It was frozen in place, my eyes welded to the map of the world sitting on my mother's head, which had shifted again so I found myself in the middle of the Sargasso Sea on my way to Portugal. I turned away from the others, and looked outside. From there, I imagined if I stood on my tiptoes, I might see

the blue island of Bermuda, but instead of the island, I found my father again standing in front of me as plain as day ... *The perfect compliment to the host*, he said. He faded, then, dissolving into a man of sticks from a drawing I had made on a map long ago. *Going Going Gone*, I heard someone say, but by then, I was underwater. *Going. Going. Gone.* Bits of Sam's manual floated by. *State the rights of your captors. Define deadly force.* How could I ever explain what was happening to me? Life all around me was changing in unbelievable ways as the man of sticks, already broken apart above me, had left me alone and now I was underwater watching my father drown.