

## Abstract

COHEN, JESSICA MARIE. *Leaving Through the Window*. (Under the direction of Angela Davis-Gardner)

The following chapters begin an episodic novel that follows a girl growing up in the Sixties and Seventies. The evolution of her awareness, particularly of physicality and the nature of embodiment, reflects the changing attitudes of the culture, as she moves from conventional suburbia into a more adventurous and inquisitive world.

# **LEAVING THROUGH THE WINDOW**

by  
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## Biography

Jessica Cohen has been a dancer, a masseuse, and a journalist. She has lived on the East Coast, the West Coast, and places in between.

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## Hiding Places

1963

Ardis plodded around the small fenced yard as the day got gray. She peered into crab grass and dandelions, and sprinkled crumbs from cheese wrapped in napkin in her shorts pocket. "King Arthur!" she whispered.

He must have left. Caught animals, bugs, birds, they either died or left, she'd come to expect. Still, she'd hoped for more, that he would greet her. Now she feared finding him with his head stiff and dry like a lawn statue. But she knelt by the doghouse, and in a far dark corner, there he was. Alone on bald ground, he was shaded by a makeshift shelter of wood slats, once home for Zola's pups, whose accidental beginnings, hugging hind ends, Ardis had watched with fascination.

As she crawled in, King Arthur withdrew his head into the round peaked table of a shell that inspired his name. She sprinkled bits of cheese around him, hoping he'd forgive her for catching him. No movement. Not wanting to trouble him, she stroked his shell, but couldn't help feeling for a finger-size hole to reach his softer parts.

As she crawled out, she felt waxy crumpled paper under her hand, and saw it was a bubble gum comic. Worn soft with folds like cracks, it must have been in someone's pocket and fell out yesterday. She wondered whose, and if someone would tell what they'd done there in the doghouse. Her insides twinged when she thought of MaryAnne's face when she

looked, what the twitches around her mouth meant she thought, what she might say. Maybe it was already being told, making its way like a lawn mower whir, back to her mother, who would tell her father. She saw the serious, straight-mouth look that would pass between them.

Ambling through the gate to the front yard, she felt her secret as a cobwebbiness around her. She eyed the houses nearby for movement, for somebody to do something, see her. The houses, all crayon-colored and shaped alike in their mix of triangles and squares, stood on lawns specked with dandelions and new trees. Behind them the sunset was striped with pink and blue, like her father's pajamas that smelled like bacon and sweat. This sunset smelled like cut grass and steak grilling somewhere down the block, people out of sight.

Across the street she saw a stray terrier everyone called Daffy. He sniffed the trunk of a skinny crabapple tree, then lifted his leg by it, dog ballet.

"Daffy!" He didn't look. Maybe he didn't know his name. She ran toward him, but he trotted away, sniffing, to the next yard. Just like King Arthur, he ignored her. She wondered if this meant something about her.

She stepped into the garage through a side door, sidled past the red Volkswagen, and took a jumbo size peanut-butter jar down from the shelf, a move she hoped would wake the fireflies inside, so they would light up and fly, since it was dusk. But no, they sluggishly crawled on twigs and wilted grass at the bottom. Once caught, powers lost, they were just bugs.

She bent over a big open jar nearby, smelling its swampiness, weeds and leaves swelling in old water. She thought a pollywog might appear, though none were caught. She took an eye-dropper from a paper cup by the jar and plunged it into the murk, squeezed, then dripped a drop of it onto a glass slide from a match box nearby.

"Ardis!" Her mother's voice, from somewhere in the house.

"What?"

"I told you to go to bed!"

"I am! I'm saying goodnight!" In the silence, Ardis heard hurry fade. Eight-thirty, not even dark. When she was nine in a few months, maybe she'd get until nine. She took the slide to her father's study, and put it under the microscope she took from a shelf full of thick medical books with pictures of deformed and diseased people she thought about sometimes. They left her worrying about possibilities, then trying not to.

She looked through the lens and saw only microscopic night, so she felt for the switch, flicked it, and found blurry blobs in the light. She turned the focus knob and the blobs became paramecia and amoeba, living their flat cartoon lives, skittering about, in and out of huddles. If she could only somehow slip in there, out of this humdrum.

"Ardis! That's enough!"

"Enough what?"

Sound of hasty steps, many feet on the stairs. Her mother in the doorway, unsmiling, flanked by Zola and Zulu. Zulu, a hefty black dog, labeled "dobermutt" at the pound, panted a smile as he trotted across the room to Ardis and licked the tip of her nose, just above the microscope lens she gazed into. Then suddenly a black whale swallowed her tiny club, as he sniffed the slide.

"No!" Ardis shouted, which alerted Zola, big black-and-white splotched "labra-dane," who bounded over to Zulu, growl-roared, reared up and landed her forelegs around his ribs. He pulled out and they faced each other, ears and tails perked, ready to scuffle, but Ardis put her arms around Zulu's ribs and pulled him down to the floor. He wriggled against her hug

and scrambled away. She chased the dogs to the door, where her mother still stood, but now stepped away to make way, her impatience changed to weary wonder.

"Ardis, I don't want to have to say it again."

Ardis looked at her mother, and measured the time left before bedtime by her mother's expression. None. Her mother stood waiting, lean, freckled arms dropped at her sides, hands unbusy by her button-down blouse and blue shorts. Ardis doubted she would ever be that tall and grim, though she had the same gray-blue eyes, pale skin, pale wavy orange hair, the ghostly redhead family thread. She wondered if her mother somehow knew what she'd done.

She trudged upstairs, following the old dog stains on the beige carpet like a worn trail. Her sister Sarah lay on the couch, curled around a plate with a circle of graham crackers spread evenly with peanutbutter and purple jelly. Watching the end of a tv show, her bedtime delay, she wore a new pale green shift tied with a bow between her shoulder blades. A green plastic headband pulled her frizzy hair back from her tv-lit face. She lifted a cracker to the big upper peak of her lips and munched like a queen. Ardis wondered if Sarah worried about being found out. Probably not. Sarah, so much more knowing at nine, always seemed on to the next thing.

Ardis pulled off her clothes, noticing the elastic tracks around her waist and the way her nipples looked like dog nipples, Zola's and Zulu's. She was an animal like them. Some days she wished she could be naked like them and just be. Today wasn't that kind of day.

After putting her underwear in the laundry chute, tempted to jump in herself, to land in some soft laundryland below, she dropped her shorts and tee-shirt on the floor of her



closet, out of sight, where they couldn't make odd shapes in the dark, though something always did. She put on ruffled pink pajamas and slid between the sheets.

"I'm in, Mom!"

"It's a miracle." Her mother soon appeared.

"How about a story?"

"We already read one."

"How about a quick one?"

"Tell yourself one." She smiled mildly, kissed Ardis on the forehead and left her alone in her room where everything was still very visible, and the sheets too warm. She stared at a scribbly painting she'd done that looked tonight like a duck with a kite. Even closing her eyes, the place behind her eyelids seemed light, and she saw paramecia there puttering around. What were they thinking? Did they think? Or like or dislike each other?

If all that happened in a drop of water, what must be happening in the air around her? That she was breathing. She must be breathing them into her lungs where they flew around until she blew them out again. What did they do in her, to her? Were they watching or judging her? Her room must be filled with invisible creatures, all guided by some also unseen being. If she could just make contact. The warmth around her felt heavy and crowded, like she could float on it. She imagined herself able to hover in midair, to slip through the window screen. Curious George, the monkey in the story her mother read aloud, went out windows and traveled along clotheslines. She opened her eyes and looked out the window where twilight thickened the air, as if invisible beings gathered there as humans went home. She could go out that window to the garage roof if she could get the screen off. Her porch to view their corner of the block.

She sloughed off the sheets and stood on the bed to inspect the screen above, feeling around the edges for something moveable, loose. Nothing. She looked through the crisscrossed metal threads, as Dirk's mother, across the street, closed their garage door from inside, slowly disappearing behind it, Ardis shut out and shut in.

She jumped off her bed and opened the door enough to see the empty living room below, and beyond, through sliding glass doors, the backs of her parents in lawn chairs on the patio, a table with beer mugs and a bag of pretzels between them, same bag as she had in the dog house yesterday. Had they found out about the dog house doings, and were they discussing it? Plotting speeches and punishment?

She stepped into the hallway, hurried down the stairs, and into the kitchen, so far seen only by a boy with a beret in a portrait from some other century in the hall, and a woman with her robe hanging half open, having a cup of tea, in a picture over the dining table. She took a steak knife from the silverware drawer, and headed back upstairs. Holding it secretively in front of her, she almost tripped and fell on it. Like sudden instant punishment.

She continued more carefully up into her room, onto her bed, and cut a slit at the center of her screen, just a short one, but felt herself dip into the slippery realm of the bad.

Beyond the screen, a boy bounced a ball down the road, feet a little turned in toward the ball, as though following his focus. It must be Dirk. She liked the way he concentrated, and the way sometimes he concentrated on her when she spoke, a pause in his inner hum. He was coming her way. In her mind, she saw him in a doghouse moment and hesitated, but then called, "Dirk!" He didn't turn, didn't hear, or didn't want to hear. "Dirk!"

He turned his head from side to side, "What?! Who is it?"

"Me!"

"Me who?"

Ardis thought of the moment Noah heard the voice of God in a Bible story she read for Sunday school.

"Me Ardis, up here!"

"Where?"

"In my room!"

He looked in her direction, but his eyes didn't find hers, and as he neared, bouncing the ball onto her bumpy gravel driveway, it bounded away, and he teetered retrieving it. As he looked up, she saw his square face in play-dough half-shapedness, unsure. Was it because he couldn't find her face or because he felt funny about the doghouse happenings, like she did?

"What are you doing up there? I still can't see you."

"Going to sleep!"

"You don't sound asleep!"

"I am asleep! That's why you can't see me. I'm sleep walking, so I'm invisible."

"Sleep walking doesn't make you invisible."

"Yes it does. And things look different. I see things you can't see."

"Like what?"

"Bunches of little creatures."

"Oh sure. Where?"

"What the dark is made of."

"No it's not. The dark is made of no light." His face's doughy doubt tautened into a smile, verge of a sneer.

"That's what you think."

"That's what scientists think."

"They could be wrong."

He slapped the air. "There's no one out there. Anyway, I gotta go home."

"You might not feel them. They're smaller than dust." She didn't want him to go, wanted to talk about the doghouse. "Where were you?"

"Chenelli's." He bounced the ball once on the pebbles.

"Whaja do there?"

"Ping pong. Man, Paul kept missing and then he started hitting the ball all over the basement, hitting windows. I thought he'd break something."

Ardis could see Dirk with Paul Chenelli, wildly batting ping pong balls around his dusty basement lit by bare bulbs, his wide mouth working with his wrist flicks. Dirk usually wore tee-shirts with a little chest pocket, but Paul wore undershirts stretched to fit his elbows and knees when he watched TV. He watched on a crumb-ridden couch with two brothers, who had tee-shirts like that too. Then she remembered him in the dog house, the one whose idea it all was.

"Didn't someone come down and yell at him?"

"His mom was talking on the phone and putting polish on her nails. She always has rollers in her hair. Have you ever actually seen her hair?"

"Uh-huh. Looks like macaroni—"

"Dirk! You come home!"

Across the street, Mrs. Dryden leaned out from the screen door, then disappeared back into the dark behind it when Dirk yelled, "Okay!"

"See ya," he said, turning and following the ball as he bounced it on a zig-zag path down the driveway. Ardis wondered what went on in his house, with Dirk's army man father, mouth always half-smiling, eyes moving, body straight, even when bent. Probably fixing something or watching TV. His mother always friendly but suspicious, cheerful but worried, washing something. Dirk in his room, putting on pajamas.

She stood on her bed at the window, and like a dog, stuck her nose through the new hole in the screen that scratched her face like brambles. She smelled its metal and on the breeze, grass, dandelions, and dog do, all chopped by the lawnmower today. She saw lights come on in rooms in other houses, and go off. People in bathrooms? Bedrooms? Door shut? She thought of the open dog house, but who could see? MaryAnne saw. What did Paul think? Ever? She thought of him hitting ping pong balls everywhere. Hard to know what he thinks, except when something pops out of his bristly head unexpected. His legs, here, then there, go more ways than most people's, his arms too, spidery, going this way and that. Like that, she felt drawn to him and pushed away.

She had brought him into the kitchen yesterday for a glass of water. Out of place, like the turtle in the yard, he sat with his weedy legs splayed under the table, a little water left in his glass, looking down at his dusty fingers drumming the table, his feet tapping, going every which way from each other as he looked out the window.

"Who's your teacher?" she had said to bring him back.

"Mrs. Trimble."

"You like her?"

"She's okay. She looks like an egg and her hair looks like an egg shell cracked over her head."

Ardis had laughed and tapped the sugar bowl with its spoon for something to do, out of synch with his tappings. They were waiting for Sarah to put on her sneakers so they could play softball in the front yard, one of the flatter ones on the block. Dirk and some others waited outside, throwing a ball around bases that were just shirts boys took off and anchored with stones. Ardis saw how bold the shirtless boys felt with bare chests, arms wilder once free from sleeves.

When a boy banged into her as she scurried to the base, she could feel how he felt about her by his skin, whether it tightened or gave, whether he looked at or just by her when he yelled, "She's out! We're up!" Whether that was all that mattered, like for Danny Burke, with his big forehead, bird eyes, baggy shorts, legs like stretched chewing gum. While she was in the outfield, Danny sat on the lawn by the driveway and tossed gravel into the grass, maybe at bugs.

Paul had played first base on her team. He looked a little at her, then a little away. He looked in short moves, quick, the forward backwardness that was like him. When he backed up to catch a ball and backed into her in the outfield, he saw her, and caught her looking at him. She could tell he felt caught, but not sorry for it, a little interested, but just quickly. Then back to his official interest, the game. He threw the ball to the pitcher, his arm in a quarter moon arc. He didn't look back again until he had to.

When Dirk looked back from second base, he rested in the look for a moment, and said something, not much, like, "How you doing back there?" but only half-interested in what she said, already a plan in his eye to look away, and the moment came so suddenly she didn't have much to say. Then he turned back to the game, eyes full of it.

Ardis wondered if he looked that way at MaryAnne too, who squatted at third base, in her striped sunsuit, waiting for a hit so she could run, fiddling with barrettes in her pixie-cut blonde hair, picking wide crabgrass to whistle with when someone on her team got up to bat. She wasn't looking around, just ready, when Sarah hit the ball, a solid smack, Sarah's kind of hit. MaryAnne took the chance and ran for home base. The ball got to the catcher right before she did.

"Yer out!"

She'd spread her hands, shrugged her shoulders, and smiled at her team, who waited, fidgeting, for their turn at bat. Ardis noticed this way MaryAnne acted when she flubbed something with people watching. Just smile and sit down. It looked so simple, but Ardis's face would twitch against her smile, and her body would curl in like a poked-at potato bug, as she thought of what she should have done. Sarah would at least act careless and proud. MaryAnne always seemed cheerful, nothing Ardis would attempt.

As the next batter practice-swung his bat at the air, Ardis felt a wetness on her neck, then shoulder, a sky leak that soon widened and began to wetten everyone, cooling but not cold. Boys swiped their shirts from bases and sidelines and wriggled into them or tucked the collars into the back of their pants, so the shirts would fly behind them on their bikes. Sarah opened the garage door so she and Ardis could put their bikes inside.

"Let's go play cards in the doghouse," Sarah had said, as players walked by.

MaryAnne said she didn't want to catch cold, and others shook their heads and mumbled reasons why not as they swung their legs over bike bars, but Dirk and Paul decided to stay. There wasn't room for more than four in the doghouse anyway. They had tromped through the house, collecting pretzels and ginger ale, and Dirk made a bathroom stop. Ardis

couldn't help imagining outsiders in their private undressed moments in her bathroom. She noticed the shade of change on his face as Dirk came out and switched from alone to watched.

When they ran through the rain to the doghouse, Ardis wondered where Arthur was. Not in the doghouse, she saw, as they clambered in. They dealt cards for hearts around the pretzel bowl and the rain came faster, then slower, bringing in smells of wet wood, dirt, grass, smellless tulips. Their bodies huddled and folded, squatting or kneeling on a dog-hairy black horse blanket Sarah brought out, they bickered and twittered about who could hit a ball furthest, then about playing volleyball at lake cottages, and strange board games and books they found on shelves there. Which reminded them of strange noises they heard at night, and ghosts.

Sarah, kneeling neatly, pushed her kinky chin-length hair behind her ears. Her round face settled into seriousness, as she said, "At my aunt's house, sometimes doors open with no one opening them and then close again. That happened in the bedroom I was staying in. I didn't know if the ghost had come in or gone out, so I just stayed perfectly still under the covers."

"Oh Sarah. That never happened," said Ardis. "I never saw that, and you never said that before."

"I did too say it. I told Mom."

"Oh sure," said Ardis. Sarah's face blended into the moist dimness.

"Once I dreamed about men fighting in my grandmother's attic, and when I woke up I heard banging up there," said Paul.



"Once I heard people fighting in the middle of the night and I went down the hall and saw my parents naked, yelling at each other in their bedroom," said Dirk. He snickered.

"Did they see you?" said Sarah.

"Yeah. My mom went into their bathroom, and my father put on his robe, and told me to go to bed."

Ardis liked knowing this, seeing it in her head, this raw peek at perfect Dirk and his parents. But when Paul said, "Oh I've seen my parents naked lots of times," she wanted to know, but wanted to hold the view of them at a distance. Something gritty and knotty about them, his mother with all her curlers and eyelid colors, his father with his hairy belly hanging over his shorts, washing his sports car that seemed too small for him.

"Hey let's all take off our clothes and put them back on as fast as we can," said Paul.

Silence until Dirk said, "Oh there's not enough space here for that."

"Okay, just pants," said Paul.

"Just shirts," said Dirk.

"Pants," said Paul.

Ardis watched Dirk's gentlemanliness loosen into mischief as the grin spread on his even face, squinting his thick eyelashes together. "Okay pants."

"You girls in?" said Paul.

"Uh-huh," said Sarah.

"In what?" said Ardis, but she saw that Sarah had no second thoughts. Ardis couldn't quite imagine taking off her pants, but she couldn't imagine leaving either. She didn't know why Sarah would do this so easily, but Ardis saw her certainty, and wanted to see what Dirk

and Paul would look like under their pants. Though she got caught between feeling drawn to Dirk's hidden underparts and unsure of some twistiness about Paul's, but curious too.

"I'll count down," said Paul. "On the count of one, we drop." He looked around. Ardis noticed the narrowness of his eyes and flatness of his head that seemed to put pressure on his inner workings. "Okay, three!" Everyone looked around at everyone else looking around, busyness behind their eyes. Sarah smiled tightly, braced against bursting out laughing. Ardis felt what it would feel like without her shorts, open to the chill of rain and nakedness.

"Two! All hands on pants," said Paul. And he put his hands on his jean shorts snap. Everyone copied, like Simon Says.

"One!" Everyone's fingers froze at their waists and looked around. No one did anything. "Come on you guys. Dirk you chicken. Whatcha hiding?" Dirk laughed and smiled his father's military good sport smile, and unzipped as Paul did. Ardis felt suddenly warm. Kneeling, she lifted her hips and pulled down her pedal-pushers. Cool air slid by her skin. It was Sarah's presence, gamely kneeling with her shorts around her knees, that embarrassed her.

When all had shucked their pants they sat huddled in different shapes that showed different parts, not much more than calves and thighs, but on the way Ardis saw all, and saw everyone else glance around too. She felt like naked baby and devil, free and caught.

Boys' things looked like old people's second chins, wrinkled and dangling, delicate, needing cover, but unruly. Paul's darker and ganglier than Dirk's. Dirk had a private pride that seemed to draw his inward, like his eyes focused in, though she saw him glance between her hips, so her thighs tightened.

"See it was nothing," said Paul, awkwardly triumphant as they sat there in their self-hiding positions, Ardis thinking about how to unclumsily dress again. And then MaryAnne's face appeared in the doorway.

"Hey," she said, friendly. Then gasped. "What are you doing?"

#

That was the worst moment. It lurked as Ardis gnawed at the screen with the knife, a slow process she began to feel uncertain about as the day dwindled. The hole looked small and useless against the largeness of darkness. Then she saw Danny Burke ride by on his bike in his big shorts that two pairs of his legs would fit in. She could look up them if she were nearer. Which made her think of a couple of days before when she'd ridden her bike down the street to visit MaryAnne, who answered the doorbell, and faced Ardis through the screen.

"You wanna come out?" Ardis said, her legs twisted around each other.

"What do you wanna do?"

"We could ride bikes."

"My mom wants me to stay in the yard. But we could go swing."

"Okay."

MaryAnne usually wanted to play on swings or with her paper dolls and their paper clothes that filled an old jewelry box. She skipped around the side of the yellow shingled house to the back yard, with Ardis trotting alongside.

At first they just sat on the swings, lulled by the rhythm of straightening their legs to swing up, bending to breeze back. Then they stood on their swings on one leg, stretching the

other out at odd angles. MaryAnne wore her rainbow-striped sun-suit with ruffled elastic around the thighs, so when Danny Burke came around singing, "I see London, I see France, I see someone's underpants," they were Ardis's, under her red and white striped culottes.

Without giving him the satisfaction of a glance, she turned around to face away from him. But he persisted, "Made you turn around! Made you turn around!"

"Just ignore the puny-brain. He doesn't have anything better to do," MaryAnn told Ardis. Then to Danny, "You better get out of my yard or it'll crack open and swallow you up." Her tight grin showed her dimples.

"Yeah you'll go back to wormland where you came from," Ardis said over her shoulder.

"Ardis has spots on her underwear!" he jeered on. They're not spots. They're dots, she almost said, but couldn't bear to talk to Danny about underwear, or anything.

"Whadja do in your underpants Ardis?!" She jumped from the swing and charged at him. His small eyes gleamed anxiously in his big crew-cut head as he pushed his palms out against her. She pushed into his ribs and he tottered and fell. She kicked his thigh as hard as she could. Her foot felt its softness and the hardness underneath. He scrambled up and she saw the fury pain turns into. She ran back to the swings, yelling, "Get out of MaryAnne's yard!"

"I don't have to!" He ran after her, his feet splayed out duck-like in his dusty sneakers, his calves flailing. She stood up on the swing and kicked at him, but he grabbed her ankle to pull her down. Anger shuddered up her spine as she clung to the swing's chains.

MaryAnne watched. She never fought. But now, giggling as Danny clung to Ardis's foot in stalemate, she slid from her swing, and plucked handfuls of grass. She ran to Danny, pulled back his Dufresne Chevrolet little league tee-shirt collar and dropped the grass down his back. He squirmed and his free arm struck out at her but she'd backed away. He let go of Ardis and squatted to snatch some grass, which he threw. But it fell around his enemies like confetti. He kicked Ardis's calf, then walked away with the muddled gait of feeling watched from behind. "You nincompoops!" he said in his I-told-you-so girlish way.

Ardis tried swinging on her stomach for a minute, but the moment had wilted, and she jumped off.

"I'm gonna ride my bike for a while," she'd said, and rode home.

#

Now she looked at her knife-work, and saw she had only cut a hole too small for a squirrel, but large enough to get her in trouble, visible as it was through the thin curtains. She put a stuffed panda on the windowsill in front of it to at least delay discovery.

The room darkened and melted the shapes of things. Ardis, not wanting to watch this change, got under her sheets and closed her eyes. For a while she saw paramecia and amoeba mingling behind her eyelids. Then they wandered off, leaving darkness, until she dreamed of being in the doghouse with Sarah and the boys. But it wasn't raining and people kept walking by the open end. Ardis couldn't quite get her pants back up, and there was MaryAnne, putting her head inside curiously.

"What are you doing in there Ardis?" she said, both curious and accusing.

Then Danny peered in. His eyes, greedily wide, became hands and arms that reached into the doghouse. Ardis felt furious, but still couldn't budge to pull up her pants. Then she heard her mother's voice.

"Ardis, what have you been doing?"

Ardis opened her eyes and saw her mother in the doorway.

"What do you mean?" said Ardis.

Her mother pointed at the window. Ardis looked at the window too, and saw the panda had fallen from the sill to her bed. Daylight revealed a clear, already warm day and the frayed screen hole.

"You know what I mean." She pointed to the screen. "That hole."

"Wow. Maybe a bird or a bug was trying to get in." Ardis liked the idea of them trying to get to her for a change.

Her mother looked doubtful. "You've been a bad girl, Ardis. No bedtime stories for you tonight."

## Chased

1966

As Ardis tipped back in her chair, balanced on two legs, she felt it begin to slip under her. She suddenly saw in her mind how the wooden chair would thud to the floor and dump her in a clump amid the desks of other sixth-graders. She grabbed for the edge of her desk and caught herself.

When she glanced around to see if anyone had seen, Mrs. Barnum was saying,

“Why is the Iliad important?” as she rapped her knuckles against the blackboard behind her, though it was still splattered with fractions from before lunch. A buxom woman with a hopeful, oval face, she wore a green corduroy jumper with a matching bow that pinned a thick black braid to her head. The class looked more or less in Mrs. Barnum’s direction. But Ardis noticed some faces turned slightly to the left, so their eyes rested on the wall of open windows that framed only leafy poplar branches crisscrossing sky, but let in smells of whatever else was growing and blowing lightly around out there, and also shouts and whistles from the playing field.

“Oswald, yer late and yer shirt’s on backwards! Get dressed right and get out there!” a man below called.

Titters cracked the classroom silence.

Some faces were turned slightly toward the right wall, watching the movement of the minute hand on a large round black clock with a white face. Ardis could hear it click forward each minute if the room was quiet, which it wasn't at the click to 1:42.

"Why read this story?" Mrs. Barnum persisted. Ardis raised her hand. In the spring daze, her hand was the first up. Why are they just sitting there? she wondered. Being quiet is so boring. "Okay, Ardis," Mrs. Barnum said.

"Because it shows how people lived at that time, and what they thought about."

"Good. Anyone else?"

Clean-cut, crew-cut Victor raised his hand. "It tells the history of a war," he said.

Ardis looked again at the other faces, wondering what exactly was going on behind them. Big, gawky Mark Vanderhugh faced Mrs. Barnum, but looked through her; he was thinking about something else. April Stone, her upturned eyes prettily framed by bangs, hair flipped up at her shoulders, looked almost prayerful; it must be a pose. Then Ardis's eye caught Jeff Goodlow's wild look of hilarity—broad smile, ridiculing eyes--as he pointed at her with his palm resting sneakily on his desk, while Mrs. Barnum went on, oblivious.

"Who knows what started the Trojan War?"

Jeff's thick dark brows and loose smirky lips gave his face a leer that often slithered with strangled mirth into his short, wiry body, contorting him with mocking laughter. He and his friends intrigued or infuriated Ardis, sometimes both at once. They all had "69" written on the covers of their notebooks, decorated with doodads and bright colors that made the digits glow. Ardis thought it might be the number of a football player.



Last week after lunch, Ardis, then sitting kitty-cornered behind Jeff, in a period of peace between them, had asked him, “So what makes ‘69’ special?” She sensed she shouldn’t ask, that she would be sorry. But she couldn’t not ask.

He looked at her with a half-smile, then turned to Gary in the back, who stood by his desk, fiddling with a pen he’d taken apart. “Ardis wants to know what’s special about ‘69.’” Gary looked back with a slit-eyed grin of secret understanding.

Too late to retreat, Ardis went forward. “So what does it mean?”

They laughed, high-pitched, cutting. They told other boys as they came back from lunch, “Ardis wants to know what ‘69’ means!” starting whole new outbursts, spat out like noisy car exhaust. Ardis sat down and opened a book, *Fundamentals of Science*. A few minutes later she tapped April, in front of her. “What’s so funny about ‘69’?”

April smiled smugly. “I’ll tell you later,” she said, but never did. After school, April rushed off, and Ardis wondered who else might know, but put off asking, as the jibes continued. It must be something secret and sexual

Now Jeff mimicked her answering Mrs. Barnum’s question, tipping his head from side to side ridiculously, teasing with an acid quality that burned. Why couldn’t he just leave her alone? She looked away and a spitball stung the side of her neck.

“Well, Helen of Troy sort of started it,” said Mark Vanderhugh uncertainly.

Ardis slid out of her chair and ran down the row of desks toward Jeff. He stood up quickly, but then jogged slowly, mockingly triumphant to the other side of the room under the clock.

“Ardis! Sit down!” Mrs. Barnum commanded. Her crocodile pumps clacked across the wood floor. But Ardis heard her only as annoying background noise, full of flimsy

threats. She whizzed through rows of classmates, faces tense or amused, as the storm blew by them. She detested their stupid stillness as she headed for the back corner where Jeff, grinning, leaned against a chipped green table that displayed a plastic model of the Parthenon.

This time she'd get back at him, a thought she momentarily forgot having had many times before, with unsatisfying results. Like last week when she'd clicked open his digit-adorned three-ring notebook and emptied it onto the floor.

She ran after him, eyes fixed grimly on his lime green shirt, its tails fluttering over his skinny black jeans, as he scrambled behind the last row back toward the windows, passing a long poster of the Greek gods, each engaged in mischief. He nimbly escaped her, flitting away like a fly avoiding a swatter. And he laughed in those high jeering tones that enraged her.

Mrs. Barnum moved strategically toward the center, glowering. Jeff stopped behind Gary in the back row as Ardis approached the front of Gary's desk. Jeff sidestepped back and forth and hooted, "Whoo-oo! Waterfall! Waterfall!"

"Meep! Meep! Man the decks!" other voices chorused, like malicious frogs.

Tears had erupted before Ardis could stop them. She swung out over the desk and Gary, knocking Jeff in the chest. This brought sudden seriousness to his sneering face. He swung at her stomach. She dug into his shoulder, for a moment feeling his bony warmth.

"Ow-how-how!" He laughed, grinning while grimacing. She dug in deeper, but he pulled away and the tee-shirt tore against her grasp.

"She's undressing him!" some boy yelled.

Just then Mrs. Barnum arrived and clasped each of them by the skin at the back of their necks like cats.

“Go back to your seats,” Mrs. Barnum ordered. “Next time you both go to the principal’s office again.”

Ardis sat down reluctantly. Mrs. Barnum plucked two tissues from a box on her desk, dropped them on Ardis’s desk, then chirped on about Helen of Troy. Ardis swiped her face with a tissue, then scribbled in her notebook. She dreaded looking up, but couldn’t resist, sensing gestures and whispers around her. She lifted her face, as though to watch Mrs. Barnum cross the front of the room, but caught the play of glances. April grinned conspiratorially at Jeff, whose face then softened from tight defiance to a small awkward smile. His eyes shifted from disdain to daydream. This stung Ardis more than anything. She gathered her woven shoulder bag, stood up and strode out.

“Where are you going, Ardis?” Mrs. Barnum asked tensely.

“Bathroom.” “Okay.”

The hall felt soothingly like an escape tunnel, with its windowless yellow cement walls and olive tiles, its sparse traffic and murmurs from classes, slices of which she saw through narrow windows on doors, distant docile faces. That would never be her. With no one watching, Ardis felt freedom from judgment and a surge of aimless vengeful urges. She’d show them—what? She passed a cluster of watercolors-- fish in bowls, some with long eyelashes and full lips, others with baseball caps, creatures made by people who wouldn’t have this happen, wouldn’t be out here in the halls wandering like a scribble outside the pink line page margin. They’d be at their desks facing forward with sideways looks and smiles

that stuck them together in the class heap. How to stop Jeff Goodlow's smile that kept him in that heap and tunneling through?

She turned a corner into the corridor where the bathroom was. But just in sight of the door with the clear plaque marked "Girls," she saw Derek Bryant coming down the hall. She wished she could disappear into the bathroom before he saw her. She felt her eyes sunken in puffiness and face sullen, somehow revealing her scuffle, which might disgust him. Derek was a Quaker and the grandson of a senator. And worse, his parents were old friends of her parents. When their families picnicked together, Derek sang folk songs with his guitar, while Ardis listened and watched, unsure how to look when Derek looked at her. She admired his muscular calm that she could not match, and felt embarrassed to meet, at this moment.

"Hey, Ardis, how's it going?"

Ardis continued past the bathroom. Entering felt like too lowly a mission in his presence.

"Oh, okay, except--" A recklessness overtook her. "I got into a fight in class."

Derek's polite interest deepened a little—parting his lips, focusing his eyes on her. Maybe that's what she really wanted to see. Just for a moment.

"Oh yeah? What about?"

"They mock me."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"So who won?"

"I ripped his shirt."

He smiled. "Does that make you the winner?"

“Yes,” she said, not sure.

He squeezed her arm and laughed as he continued on his way. “I hope so. I gotta go. I’ll see you later.”

Ardis continued walking in the other direction down the hall, her face warm with a new mortification. Why couldn’t she just keep things to herself? Keep everything to herself. Like in a suitcase for stupid comments. With her silence, she would confuse and intrigue the others. Except that she’d tried that, and it lasted maybe an hour, and no one noticed.

She was approaching the double doors that led outside. She looked around. The receptionist chatted with the principal’s secretary in a glass office like an aquarium, reminding Ardis of the painted fish down the hall.

She walked through the doors, out of the plastic odor of school, into real air, at this moment a mix of new greenery and bus exhaust. A lone bus idled in the half circle driveway in front of the school. She looked down the busy street lined with old houses and old trees, past the traffic light to a little cluster of stores—One Hour Martinizing Dry Cleaner, Fox’s Bagels, Baskin-Robbins, places she would be unknown. She imagined walking down that road for an ice cream cone. She could get there in two minutes, eat the ice cream in five, and be back in less than ten.

She walked up the sidewalk along the school to the road, and took a few steps off the sidewalk down the road. Slowed by a vague fear of lawlessness, she remembered once when she floated too far from the dock at the lake on a blow-up raft. When she finally looked through its plastic window, the lake bottom looked like a distant rocky planet.

As she approached the plaza, a red Plymouth pulled in, like bruised fruit with its dents and rust, music spilling out of the windows, “Bring it on home—bring it on home to

me!” insistent but sort of sad. When the music stopped, a man with dark beard, ponytail, and patched jeans, stepped from the driver’s seat and strutted to the sidewalk near the big cardboard ice cream cone covered with flavor names, while a woman with a braid down her back, reaching toward the hem of her short denim skirt, got out and half-skipped around the car to meet him. He embraced her and they kissed for a long time. As Ardis approached, she watched them in profile, their lips molding around each other, fingers sliding under each others’ clothes. Feeling what the woman’s pale legs, so bare and visible, must feel like mingling with the man’s hidden in denim, the braid twining along her back like a vine, Ardis felt herself dissolving into the feeling between them, unsteady her step. She wondered if ‘69’ had anything to do with long kisses.

When the couple parted, they each slid an arm around the other’s waist, and Ardis felt them watch her hesitant walk toward the list of ice cream flavors.

“Hi,” the woman said, smiling in a way that could have been friendly but could also be the scornful smile of someone caught in mischief by a fool, which Ardis thought she might be, compared to them and what they must know, at least about kissing.

“Hi,” said Ardis, looking at the 31 flavors.

“You look a little lost,” said the woman. The man gave his companion a cautioning look, but she kept smiling, and Ardis sensed a mission, rather than mockery, at work in her. When she smiled, her cheeks rounded firmly into small peaks, suggesting a pure cheerfulness that intrigued Ardis, to whom cheerfulness seemed fleeting, like ice cream. But with the woman’s smile one eyelid fluttered slightly, hinting at some misfortune.

“No, I know where I am. I’m just getting some ice cream,” Ardis said.

“Short school day, huh?” suggested the woman. “What holiday is it?”

“It’s not a holiday. I’m just taking a break.”

“It’s your holiday!” The woman’s smile expanded.

“Just a little ice cream holiday.”

“I bet you left school because it was oppressive.” Her smile narrowed to maternal concern.

“What do you mean oppressive?”

“Confining. Feels like jail.”

“Well sort of.”

“We felt the same thing. So we found another way. We made another way.”

“What way?”

“Expansive,” she said stretching her free arm out behind her, the glee of discovery intensifying her smile. “We go to the big school. School of the world in a family of friends in a big house. I’m Dahlia. This is Jason.”

“I like your names.”

“We chose them! Who are you?”

“Ardis. So what do you do?”

“Oh, we paint, make pottery, grow herbs, touchable things.”

Ardis had a brief vision of learning to kiss like them from someone in their house that must be full of knowing people. She looked into the cave-like back seat of the VW, covered with a tie-dyed quilt, yellow with orange sunbursts and patchwork pillows. Above, dangling crystals encircled the ceiling light. The open ashtrays held tiny twisted butts like stubbed out thoughts. It seemed sort of safe, sort of sullied, intriguing, rescue from the jaws of ridicule.

But nothing ever seemed to turn out neatly. Everything had a quirk. Her parents would be suspicious of them. Though Dahlia didn't seem to see quirks anywhere, not even in Ardis, which Ardis appreciated. She felt drawn to the soft fadedness of their clothes, their clothes formed around their bodies like they fitted around their lives and each other. Jason balanced Dahlia's rounded evenness with his angles, not just the sharp and narrow bones of his face and small pointed beard, but his inner angled eyes taking in every move around him like an overhead spy mirror in a store, magnifying. Ardis felt the moment magnified under his gaze. Their blend of hope and knowingness, and their knowing how to blend with each other, made it seem easy.

But her earlier plan lingered like an itch. Five minutes for ice cream. How many had it been? And there was something scary about her break with the day's duties, and a feeling of something unfinished.

"I better go back now," she said.

"Okay Ardis, good to meet you. Don't let them confine you," said Dahlia, moving closer and taking Ardis's hand between hers.

"You take care Ardis," said Jason, his voice, finally heard, sounded relieved.

Ardis walked back down the street toward school, the feeling of Dahlia's hands squeezing hers slowly fading. As she walked back down the school driveway, she noticed the driver of the idling bus eyeing her, a man with a long, craggy face. She headed back inside for the bathroom.

Bathrooms gave her a chance to reflect and also see her reflection, which she immediately did, in a long mirror against yellow cement, above three small white sinks. After seeing herself for a moment in Dahlia's life, seeing herself in the school mirror sobered her.



She silently scolded her pale orange hair for its every which way curls at odds with her face, a telltale show of inner loose ends and disorder, along with her freckles. Her hair spread from a high center part leaving her forehead bare like a speckled moon, but her eyes glared at herself from deep beneath her brows. Life might have been different if she had dark hair like Dahlia's, long, straight, reliable hair that didn't fly around at the least breeze. Something always muddled her thinking and got her in trouble.

As she pulled a pink plastic comb from her shoulder bag, which kept slipping from her shoulder to her elbow, the door swung in, followed by Beth Jenkins.

"Aha! Thought I'd find you here," she said merrily, but with a hesitant smile. Ardis looked at Beth sourly, knowing Mrs. Barnum had probably sent her to soothe and retrieve her. Beth loved meddling in class melodramas. The only daughter of a farmer, she tended to be ickily sentimental —ruffles on her blouses, gooeyness about holidays and going to church. Ardis wondered how she overlooked the disappointing dinginess of things.

"Are you okay?" Beth asked more somberly.

"Yes."

"So how about coming back to class? We miss you already."

"I'm sure."

"Y'know if you'd just ignore those boys, they'd leave you alone."

"I doubt it."

"How do you know? Have you ever tried it?"

"Yes."

"For how long? Five minutes?"

That was probably about right.

“I just don’t see why they should be able to get away with it.” She responded to Beth only grudgingly, partly because of her role as teacher’s messenger and partly because sometimes when the boys ridiculed Ardis, she’d noticed Beth laughing. Allying herself with them was Beth’s way of dealing with them. Every girl had her way.

Ardis sometimes wanted to be some other way, but the options she saw around her didn’t fit. There were the good sports, like Beth, who ignored or laughed at cutting comments. But this approach collided with Ardis’s sense of fairness and her sense of humor. There were the studious girls who ignored insults, looking disdainfully away, but this sort of self-containment eluded Ardis. Then there were the coy, reserved girls, like April, who smiled slyly when approached. And they were often approached, their newly rounded bodies dressed neatly in pleated skirts, dark fuzzy knee socks, penny loafers, and tailored blouses that fell open casually at the collarbone. This role would have been appealing, except Ardis’s body hadn’t gotten around to rounding out, and the urge to speak out in class and rebuff unjust remarks too often overpowered her.

“Well you’ll be in trouble if you don’t come back,” Beth warned. “Mrs. Barnum’s at the end of her yoyo string with you.”

This information sparked a vision of Mrs. Barnum calling her parents, who would then demand an explanation for her behavior, which she could hardly explain to herself. She cringed at the thought of her parents’ humorless faces as they scrutinized her like a budding criminal.

“I’ll be up in a minute. I just wanna wash my face,” Ardis said, as though she’d been planning to come anyway.

“I’ll wait for you,” Beth said.

“I’ll come by myself.” Beth was a sometime friend whose house she’d visited and whose cows she’d played with, but Ardis refused to surrender to her.

“Okay. See ya in class.” Beth looked at her doubtfully and left.

Ardis savored the last of her solitude as she splashed cold water on her face, paper toweled it off, tucked her ever-bunching white blouse back down into the blue flower-print skirt her mother made, pulled up her sagging knee socks, combed her hair, and re-entered the school’s arteries, feeling like one of the invading germs they read about in the science textbook. The secretive chatter of a couple of older girls walking down the hall ahead of her sounded like a foreign language.

When Ardis turned the corner back into the hallway lined with fishbowl paintings, she noticed, on the opposite wall, watercolors of the solar system, under a half-sheet of manila paper with “Planetarium Trip” printed on it in purple marker. Creatures inhabited some planets. One variety had large, wide-eyed faces, skinny bodies, and long curvy tails. She imagined having a tail to swish haughtily around her.

Marvin, the janitor, scuffed toward her, pushing a bucket on wheels with a ropey gray mop that matched his slicked back hair. Ardis tried to imagine him in sixth grade, but couldn’t. Kids called him Marvelous Marv, sometimes with scornful overtones that deepened his grim inwardness. His middle sagged, as did his face, his eyelids overhanging his eyes. She wondered how he got that way.

“Hi Marv.” Pretending to be normal brightened her for a moment.

“Hello young lady,” he said, half seeing her, sunken into his own thoughts.

As Ardis neared her class, she slowed to look into the door windows of other classes. In one, she saw a teacher walking among the desks, watching students bent over work. Tall,

with silver hair high and curled, she reminded Ardis of the Corinthian column on a classroom poster.

Reaching her class, she stood by the door for one last free moment, but having nothing particular to do with that moment, she stepped in. A few heads turned her way, then turned back. Mrs. Barnum was talking about the Trojan horse. Mark Vanderhugh fingered erasers in the hollow of his desk. April looked attentively at Mrs. Barnum, but her pen was poised on a small piece of paper, probably a note to be passed later to Marcia. With his legs stretched and crossed in front of him, Jeff stared absently at his worn black high top sneakers. Ardis slipped back into her seat by the windows and resumed her scribbling, from which a cackling face emerged.

“What was important about Achilles’ heel?” Mrs. Barnum asked. No hand went up at first.

Then, in the back by the clock, Debbie Stern raised her hand. A staticky, nervous girl, barrettes at her temples always restrained her short frayed hair.

“Okay, Debbie?” Mrs. Barnum pointed at her.

Ardis twisted around to look at her.

“It was the place where the enemy could get him!” she said giddily.

As Ardis turned back around to the front, she caught Jeff Goodlow watching her. The torn flap of his tee-shirt hung open, leaving part of his shoulder bare. He smiled. Not a smile like Dahlia’s, at everything, Jeff’s smile was for her. She looked quickly away, then wondered what the smile meant.

‘69 Faintly

Ardis felt someone tug her dress down over her thighs, which she realized she should have done herself. She felt cool tile floor under her body. Her head ached and sounded like the ocean in a shell. Opening her eyes, she saw people around her, kneeling, squatting, or standing, looking down. By Ardis’s elbow stood Nancy Hess, her mascara-heavy eyelids lowered to observe Ardis with slack detachment. Why was Nancy there, and why was she herself on the floor? Stephanie squatted solemnly at her ankle, maybe the one who had pulled the dress down. Ardis felt heat from Mr. Sullivan’s taut thigh through his suit pants a few inches from her ear where he knelt, appealing but repulsive too. His chipped tooth showed through the crooked parting of his lips, his usual wry smile dissolved in purposeful calm as their eyes met.

“How’re you feeling, Ardis?” You took a little spill there.”

Her fury with him seeped back She stared beyond him at a forest of foot sculptures framed by desk legs, the feet of the class. She wasn’t sure she could say anything. Maybe she shouldn’t, and pretend not to be there. “What happened?” she said anyway.

“Looked like you fainted,” said Mr. Sullivan. Ardis thought she saw Nancy’s long neck vibrate with a private chuckle. She wondered what they’d all seen of her thighs or any other part of her. She slid her legs together and thought about sitting up and getting up, but that seemed too sudden and drastic for her dazed body and for the watchers, the ninth grade

history class. She remembered a woman, lots of dimpled flesh, in Woolworth's, having convulsions on the dirty tile floor in the candy department, drooling and flailing amid the smell of sweat, cherry lollipops and cellophane. Ardis wondered if she might have had convulsions in front of class. She licked her lips to see if they were wet with spit, but her whole mouth felt dry.

"Would you like some water?" She could smell Mr. Sullivan's coffee breath, and his nearness felt strange, like bumping into a museum display.

"No thanks." She didn't want to admit any need right now in front of the class or him. A trace of his habitual sarcasm gleamed through his concern. She wondered how she would get up, how she would leave. The nurse had come in with pillows and was putting them under Ardis's knees.

"If you'll let me lift your legs, I'll put these here to get the blood flowing to your head. What happened, dear? What's your name?" Ardis listened to the murmur from the class, and pretended not to hear the nurse's questions. Mr. Sullivan straightened up and surveyed the room. Ardis watched the way the muscular crescent of his calf shaped his suit leg with stiff indifference.

"Take out your books and do the questions on the Salem witch trials at the end of Chapter Five," he said to the room. Books slapped onto desk tops, and Ardis took the moment of commotion to sit up. She faced the nurse who, with her gray curls and maternal buxomness, looked back in the calm businesslike way of nurses, that says nothing about the body can surprise or disgust them.

"Ready to get up?" .

Ardis looked down as she stood up, wooziness magnified by all the eyes. As she turned to the door she noticed her pile of index cards stacked on a desk. Maybe Stephanie picked them up, leaning over with her long dark hair falling around the jumbled cards that must have scattered when Ardis crumpled. Some boys, maybe including Kevin, would have watched her, though fearing she would look up and, catching them at it, smile derisively. Ardis, through her daze, felt vaguely irritated with her, and as she took the cards, she glanced at Stephanie, whose innocent gaze, Ardis could see, only skimpily covered her guilt. She watched, with the curious others, as Ardis left with the nurse. Ardis feared looking back, but her own curiosity let her eyes wander just long enough to see Kevin and the thoughtfulness in the angular calm of his face, more thoughtful maybe than the rest, who seemed to show only the fleeting kind of interest in oddity and disruption. But his calm always seemed invincible.

Once in the hall, Ardis felt the liberty of exile, but was bound to the abandoned class by the image of her sprawled self left behind, mingled with Kevin's face, and the words on the top index card from her interrupted oral report: "Betty, supposedly bewitched by Tituba in 1690." Betty who had "fits" maybe like the woman in Woolworth's. What did Ardis have?

People in the hall flowed by, confidently upright. Girls hugged books to sweaters that covered rolled waists of skirts, shortened to reveal a stretch of thigh in over-the-knee socks, or stockings with maybe a shiny streak of nail polish on a run. They showed only what they wanted to show, though Ardis had seen more in the locker room, the way nakedness took away the tidiness clothes imposed. Thighs that funneled up neatly from the knee in navy tights to the hem of a plaid skirt, nude might lead to a pocked and pimpled bottom and back already arced and lopsided, as though formed by clutching books. Or pale circular symmetry, the girls boys leaned into against lockers. What had the class seen of her thighs? What had

her face done without permission? She thought of the Woolworth's woman, eyes rolling, face twitching.

She watched boys take long strides, swaggering side to side in their khaki pants or jeans, some with big felt team jackets that bubbled over their shoulders, broadening them, books hooked competently under one arm. The hulking jacketed ones only passed out in festive circumstances, outside, late at night after parties where they drank too much, far out of her sight, places she wasn't invited. They wouldn't collapse in front of a class, limbs askew like a squashed spider, everything in view of Kevin. And Kevin, what had he thought, hearing Mr. Sullivan read Stephanie's note out loud. Any interest he might have had in her must be dead. Why had Stephanie passed that note, knowing Mr. Sullivan's glee in reading notes aloud?

Mrs. Reynolds, hand on Ardis's back, guided her to a cot. "You just lie here and rest. Can you tell me what happened?"

Ardis stared at the pale green curtains surrounding her and through the curtain opening at the things nearby ready for calamity— peroxide, bedpan, jar of tongue depressors that gag, sink for bloody messes and germs, and finally back to the stethoscope on the nurse's chest.

"How did you feel before you fainted?"

"Well I don't remember fainting at all. But I felt queasy when I went up to do my oral report." And she'd felt furious, furious and embarrassed. She'd wanted to throw her desk at Mr. Sullivan and stomp out.

"Did you eat breakfast this morning?"

"Sort of."



“What do you mean? What did you have”

“Cheerios.”

“With milk?”

“Uh-huh.”

She’d gone over her oral report index cards as she ate, but she’d gotten to the table late because she kept changing her mind about what to wear, finally deciding on the red sweater-dress, leaving a heap of rejected selves draped over her desk chair. At least a sweater-dress couldn’t untuck or unbutton.

As she ate she read her cards about the old man accused of witchcraft in Salem. He lay with a board on top of him to which the prosecutor would keep adding rocks until he confessed. When Ardis imagined herself under all the rocks, she could only see herself struggling and protesting. But he said, “More weight,” and died.

“So you ate a whole bowlful?”

“Some.”

. As she’d pictured herself under the rocks, she heard the rumble of the bus, and left a cluster of swollen Cheerios in a milk puddle. She tucked her cards into Changing America, one of a pile of books on the kitchen table, and ran to the front door, nearly colliding with Sarah, who was on her way out. Ardis crunched barefoot into a pile of snow on the front step and yelled toward the bus, “Wait for me!!” Then she’d called to Sarah, who was halfway down the yard, “Will you tell him to wait?”

“I’m not doing it for you today, Ardis.”

Ardis ran back to her room, grabbed tights from her sock drawer to put in her purse, pulled on her boots over bare legs, took her books and ran toward the bus, but sunk in snow at every step.

“How were you feeling when you left the house?”

“Fine.”

“Any head injuries lately?”

“No.”

Once on the bus, she dashed for an empty seat and scooted to the window. She felt inside her purse for reassurance that her tights were there. They weren't.

“Have you been feeling anxious?”

“No.”

She studied Ardis. “You probably didn't eat enough breakfast, dear. Maybe you should just rest today. I'll call your mom.

Ardis watched the nurse moving about her well-equipped domain with all its washable surfaces, white porcelain, stainless steel, and more tile. She wondered how Mrs. Reynolds could stand day after day plodding through blood and sickness. Ardis kept her eyes open so, should some new mishap turn up, she would be ready.

Finally, her mother appeared in the doorway like a stray character from another movie, and led Ardis to the car, icy wind around her legs.

“So what happened, Ardis?” She unlocked the passenger door of the blue Buick that seemed so gawky to Ardis as she slid in and faced forward, resigned to the inquiry.

. “The nurse told you. I fainted.” Fainted. What a word.

“You were just sitting in class and you fainted?”

Ardis heard prying suspicion in her mother's voice. Drugs, probably her mother thought she was doing drugs. All those pictures in the paper of college students in tight, ragged clothing with splashes of faded color, even an art teacher at school who'd been arrested for having marijuana and LSD. She had short feathery hair and round glasses through which Ardis always felt she saw things differently. Ardis imagined her after school life in a coarse world with people who exchanged low-toned comments, living in some attic apartment in the city, raided by police who must have gone through her drawers, probably neat drawers, while she stood by with that owlish, frustrated look she had when boys threw slimy balls of clay at each other, or dropped them into the backs of girls' sweaters.

"I wasn't just sitting there. I was doing my oral report." She looked out at the line of pastel houses giving way to bored cows in pastures along roads heaped with gray slush like ashes.

"Were you nervous?"

"Sort of."

"What was on your mind?"

"Oh nothing."

"A boy in class."

"Oh Mom." Ardis could barely think about that moment. She had been talking about the judge who condemned the witches to die, and how his own daughter had died soon after, and he'd felt that was God's judgment on him, a "Corrective Affliction," heading of the next index card. As she changed cards, she looked up and caught Kevin staring emptily at her bare knees, which then felt particularly foolish suspended there between snowboots and

sweaterdress, like false teeth in a glass.

“How do you feel now?”

“Embarrassed.”

“Do you feel sick at all?”

“ Not really, no.”

“Well, you take a rest today, and I’ll be working downstairs.”

Downstairs. Ardis glanced at her mother, noticing the way her paleness fit her basement life so well, that little paneled room with one high window, like in a cell, and lots of little shelves piled neatly with envelopes and stationery with her mother’s face encircled with reddish curls, smiling knowingly. Knowing what? At least knowing the whereabouts of certain exotic foreign stamps, like the Bhutan 3-D butterflies, Ardis’s favorite in the stock of her mother’s mail order stamp collection business.

“Mom, can I have a set of Bhutan 3-D butterflies?”

“What for?”

“Just to have.”

“If you vacuum the house.”

“Okay.” Her mother was grateful for any housework she could reassign. “How come they have 3-D butterfly stamps in Bhutan? What kind of country is that?”

“That’s a good question. Look it up.”

“I will.”

When they finally pulled into the garage, Ardis left her mother making Swiss cheese sandwiches in the kitchen, to slip into her father’s study. She pulled a thick old Columbia Encyclopedia from the bottom shelf, sat cross-legged on the rug and opened it carefully. Zulu

had chewed off the binding, so the bug-thin pages threatened to fall apart, mixing up life's intricate details in her lap. Under "Bhutan," certain phrases attracted her: "semi-independent state in the E Himalayas N of Bengal and Assam and S of Tibet . . . Formerly under the dual control of a spiritual and a temporal ruler, it has been since 1907 under a maharaja. The inhabitants are mostly Buddhists although some are Hindu. . ." Ardis thought of Stephanie's Thai Buddhist aunt, with the Buddha statue on her living room mantel. On either side, incense sticks like scepters sometimes surrounded the Buddha with scented smoke. Stephanie always trailed that smell, unlike other girls whose breeze carried Ambush or Taboo. In the locker room, Stephanie watched them spray it on as though observing a strange cultural ritual, which it seemed to be under her detached gaze.

Why had she passed that note today? Was she being helpful, or hurtful for her own amusement, knowing what Mr. Sullivan did with notes? Sometimes she seemed like a spy, maybe like her father. People said her father was doing "intelligence work" in Vietnam, and that was why she lived with her aunt. Stephanie said her father was just an interpreter. But she could mold and sculpt the truth like those clay animals she made in art class that looked like parodies of people, with their crazy expressions. She lined them up on her dresser at her aunt's house like a parade of her silly impressions of others.

Stephanie saw parts of people Ardis missed. She caught them from odd angles. Like Kevin. His watchful solidity, reminded Ardis of the Buddha statue, though Kevin had a big chest and broad cheekbones. But Stephanie said, "Oh he's just scared."

Ardis had paused to consider the idea. "That's okay. I like that about him too," she'd said, and she did. Another facet to find out about. If she could ever get the chance. She felt close to Stephanie at these moments of intertwined understanding. But Stephanie had

laughed, cackled. And then today she passed the note. She was like the Vietcong on the news, the enemy no one knew how or where they'd appear. She herself seemed to belong nowhere in particular; with her American father and Asian mother, she liked to perch herself at some midway observation point above.. Her eyes were blue but slanted a little; her skin was a little dark, but not brown, her body rounded but boyish. With her skirts she wore tan suede boots. "They farm the land where possible. . and raise a breed of sturdy ponies. Wild animals abound, especially elephants." Ardis imagined herself there, then closed the book, put it back and pulled the dictionary off a higher shelf. Faint. "Vi." "To lose consciousness because of a temporary decrease in the blood supply to the brain," was only the third meaning. The first meaning, "archaic," was "to lose courage or spirit." She put the dictionary down, and searched the shelf for her father's fat medical textbook.

"Do you want a sandwich, Ardis?" Her mother eyed her from the hall.

"I'm not hungry, Mom."

\* \* \*

The next morning, hours before her mother would scurry down the hall, slippers flapping against the carpet, to let the dogs out and make toast, Ardis woke with a teeth-chattering chill. Feeling a dizzying nausea, she focused on an abstract painting over her bureau that looked sometimes like a disjointed person with a flying hat, other times like a cat romping through a constellation. Then she gazed at her desk chair, buried under layers of clothes tried on and discarded before school yesterday, a pile of all the possible ways the day could have turned out differently. Jagged stacks of books and papers formed islands around

the desk. A bag of cellophane wrapped caramels gaped open on the floor by a stuffed chair with Wuthering Heights slung open across an arm.

Ardis narrowed her focus to the red flying hat, the only red in the abstract, which was otherwise pastel greens, blues and pinks that matched the flowered curtains filtering the dawn haze. The picture seemed childish. Maybe her parents chose this painting to keep her in childhood. Sometimes she saw manipulative motives in her parents as clearly as she saw things sailing through blue in the painting.

Needing a focus with more constancy to calm her queasiness, she looked toward the window, where she'd once tried to carve an exit in the screen to some imagined elsewhere. Leaving through the window made any arrival strange and interesting. But the hatch in her mind to that exit had disappeared. And the idea of any outing brought a wave of dizziness, like before she fainted yesterday, when she'd looked at the class for dramatic effect as she said, "Anybody could be a witch." They looked indifferent, and then she disappeared., like death, where others could see her decaying self, but she couldn't. She could faint and never come back if she had that disease in the medical book where rotting nerves made consciousness blink on and off. In the picture, the nerve looked like a frayed phone cord a cat had chewed on.

"Time to get up!" Ardis's mother announced , putting only her face into the bedroom through the partly opened door, in her quick, cheery way.

"I don't feel well, Mom."

"What's the matter?" She opened the door an inch more.

"My stomach feels bad and I have chills. I think I have a fever."

Her mother's blue striped bathrobe flapped away from her nylon nightgown as she bustled in businesslike, not one for sappy indulgence of sick children. She felt Ardis's forehead.

"Maybe you are a little warm. I'll get a thermometer."

But her father brought the thermometer. Ardis could see he'd already become the doctor that he was every day when he left the house, a comfortable role in which he knew what to do. Sickness engaged him, like a broken car would a mechanic, furrowing his face with concern. Dressed in a suit for work, exuding Old Spice, he sat down on the bed.

"Mom says you're feeling a little under the weather," he said, shaking down the thermometer. "Are you nauseous?"

"Yeah."

He put the thermometer in her mouth.

"Is your throat sore?"

She shook her head.

"Let me feel your glands." He felt expertly under her ears. "No swelling. I'll get you something for your stomach." Besides his reserve of over-the counter remedies, he kept a trove of drug samples in a large cardboard box on the top shelf of his closet.

When he returned with bottle and spoon, he whisked the thermometer from Ardis's mouth and squinted at it. "Well, you're a little high, 100.2. Maybe you should stay home today." He poured a spoonful from the bottle, and carried it to Ardis's lips, the same ritual as when she was five.

Then he went on to the kitchen. His toast and coffee smelled distasteful to Ardis this morning. She slid down and arranged her body in a way that allayed her spinning insides.



Dizzy and nauseous, she looked at the ceiling, as morning seeped through the curtains, lightening the room to a rumpled sick day hue.

The bus would come in an hour, and for once she wouldn't be there. She liked the feeling of being unwatchable, her doings and whereabouts unknown. She pictured the neighbor kids cutting through their yards, freshly dressed, books in hand on their way to the bus stop. For a long time, Ardis had savored those few chatty minutes waiting for the bus on that corner marked by green crisscrossing street signs, Briar Drive, her street, and Cantwell Lane, surrounded by lawns of varying greenness and shortness, punctuated with spindly young trees. The wait was a chance for banter with Dirk, now a class officer and football player. The way he looked straight at her, that old dog house bond still lingered somewhere, though no one ever mentioned the event. But then she heard from her mother, who'd heard it from Mrs. Kinski next door, that Dirk had been caught in the back of his father's VW bus drinking beer with Sandy Dunfry. She'd moved in down the street last summer—a strong-legged girl with heavy dark shoulder length hair, button features, and a barbed giddiness that struck unpredictably.

Sometimes, approaching the bus stop corner, Ardis saw Dirk standing close to Sandy when they talked. When Sandy greeted Ardis, her voice had a singsong sardonic edge that left Ardis wondering if the two of them had laughed at her as she walked toward them, so walking became more difficult. Sometimes she could hardly remember how to coordinate the motion of one leg with the other.

But that problem disappeared when running to catch the bus became a regular necessity. At the last minute, she would look in the mirror and change her mind about what to wear or decide to put her hair in a ponytail or pig tails or change her mind about which of

those. On her sprint to the arriving bus, a book or two would escape from the pile in her arms. As she scooped them up, others would fall. As she finally walked down the bus aisle, Stephanie would shake her head in amused disgust. Ardis wondered why Stephanie, so much smoother, stayed her friend. But then she was friends with many, and no one in particular.

Ardis's mother poked her head in. "Would you like some tea?"

"What kind?" The medicine seemed to be working, so Ardis could sit up without fear of overturning her stomach. Her mother brought a mug with the Lipton tag hanging over the side. "You are what you think," it said. She imagined a Tetley tea factory person concocting pithy wisdom as the bags slid by on the conveyor belt,. She noticed she thought of herself as a splat, today contorted in bed, yesterday on the classroom floor. How humiliating. She wished she could drop the image from an opening in the back of her head into a black hole, like she read about in science, never to reappear. But the sound of Mr. Sullivan's snide voice kept replaying. He was talking about Cotton Mather's notion that the devil planted witches in New England to undo good people when Stephanie put her hand on Ardis's desk top. When she withdrew it, she'd left a much folded and wadded piece of notebook paper. It seemed as obvious and out of place as an Easter egg, but Ardis put her hand over it with a casual motion as Mr. Sullivan's gaze swept over the class while he talked. But then his gaze reversed and landed sickeningly on her desk.

"What have we here, girls?" That twisted smile. Silence as he looked directly at Ardis. She felt the maleness of his attention even as she awaited the miserable moment ahead.

"Me?"

“Let me have that, Ardis. You know the rules. All communication during class is public.”

She wished she could squash the wad to nothing in her hand. But maybe Stephanie had just written something silly and she wanted this to happen. Ardis handed the note to Mr. Sullivan disdainfully. He opened it and read with mock seriousness:

A-

We started dissecting fetal pigs in biology today. Almost passed out from formaldehyde fumes. Bad drug. My lab partner was kind of ghoulish about it, laughing like Dracula. The pigs look like dead babies. We called ours

Lulu. Anyway, thought you might want to know before you made your move—

Kevin seemed pretty cozy with his lab partner, Becca O’Neil. —S

The class twittered. Boys hooted. Although Kevin was sitting on the other side of her, Ardis avoided looking at him until she stood in front of the class to give her oral report. She reviewed the moment again—his vacated face. She could never ask him, or anyone, to the Sadie Hawkins Dance.

She drank the tea over the pages of *Wuthering Heights*, her reading for English. But when Catherine Earnshaw’s affectional quandary, which seemed to be moving toward catastrophe, exhausted Ardis, she pushed aside book and blankets and traipsed to the kitchen for a plate of raisin toast, which she balanced in her lap on the living room couch while she watched soap operas. After one ended with a woman walking in on her husband and her sister in suspicious proximity to each other, another with a woman being hit by a car, she went back to bed to do crossword puzzles and listen to the radio. As she turned it on, the Rolling Stones sang, “Ruby Tuesday, who could hang a name on you?” She considered

“another word for monkey,” with five letters, for 4. Down and wondered how it would feel to be so cavalier, so independent as Ruby. Maybe devil-may-care would be her new attitude when she got back to school. Who cares about Becca O’Neil? She’d ask Kevin if he would go to the Sadie Hawkins Day Dance with her in an offhand way, so whatever he said would be just a minor, forgettable occurrence.

She imagined him coming toward her in the hallway near her locker. He usually passed that way after second period, the same time she traded books at her locker after gym class. A little short, he played on the track team. Quiet stamina, something reachable about him that she liked. He offered his notes to copy when she missed something, and she reciprocated. But that tracing paper skin of politeness. What could be under that?

She wouldn’t ask him in class. They’d be trapped there together. She would ask in the hall. He would round the corner by the athletic trophies. She’d be standing by her open locker. He’d say, “Hi Ardis,” like he always does. She’d say, “Hi Kevin. Hey, are you going to the Sadie Hawkins Day dance?” He might pause, turn and say, “Maybe,” quizzically. She’d say, a little coy, “Would you want to come with me?”

She couldn’t quite imagine him agreeing.

Maybe she should forget it. Her father would say, “Nothing ventured. Nothing gained.” That was the way he lived. He’d be a meagerly educated blue collar worker if he hadn’t ventured out of his family’s misfortune and worked himself through medical school driving ice cream trucks. But she wouldn’t ask him about this. Too many sexual overtones that would provoke questions. She didn’t know what her mother would say.

“Mom!”

“What Ardis? I’m in the kitchen.” Realizing she lost her invalid status when she came out to watch TV, Ardis worked her feet out from under quilt and cat, Athena, into fuzzy slippers, matted and dingy as the day, to head for the kitchen. She sat down at the table and watched her mother, slender, but defiantly unfashionable with her short wash and wear hair and polyester pants. She was preparing a pot roast that reminded her of Lulu the pig, and uncertainty resurged.

“Mom, did you ever ask someone to go out with you?”

“Once.”

“What happened?”

“I married him.”

“You mean Dad?”

“Who else did I marry?”

“What did you invite him to do?”

“We needed a fourth for bridge. We crossed paths a lot at the hospital when I was driving an ambulance. He seemed a little lonesome. I didn’t know that was how he always seems.”

“ I mean just out of the blue. Someone you didn’t talk to much.”

“ Why, is that something you want to do? Can’t you just wait until he asks you?”

Ardis felt her mother’s gaze was uncomfortably serious, but pressed on.

“I was just thinking about it hypothetically. Do you think it’s a bad idea?”

“Well, it could put you in an awkward position. He might not be interested in you, just see you as someone he can take advantage of.”

“But if he’s a nice guy.”

“Nice guys are subject to natural forces too, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.” Sexual particulars weren’t a topic she liked to discuss.

“Oh Mom.” Ardis tipped her chair back, let it drop, and left the kitchen, laughing. She climbed back into her dissheveled bed, *Wuthering Heights* and crossword puzzles nestled in the sheets with Athena. The cat stretched, then found a new niche by Ardis’s knees, indifferent about time’s passage, chances missed, unlike Ardis who opened the novel to where she left off, marked by a caramel wrapper, and stared at the page, feeling a little bruised from having given her mother a glimpse of her fragile plan, only to have her dismiss it. She wasn’t sure what exactly her mother meant by “natural forces,” but she seemed to be seeing monsters everywhere—probably “sexual intercourse.” Her mother seemed to think it lurked at every intersection of male and female, but Ardis couldn’t fathom how it would occur, or look or feel.

When she’d asked her father, years before, how pregnancy happened, her father pulled a spiral notebook and pen from his shirt pocket, and drew a sketch showing the route of sperm to egg in a diagram that could have been about vectors and geometry, but didn’t look much like body parts she’d seen. Sex education, a much smirked-about section of the biology curriculum, entailed not much more than similar sketchy slides and movies about remorseful girls giving birth.

She returned to Catherine Earnshaw’s struggles until she heard some commotion in the hallway as the dogs greeted Sarah who, coming home from the school newspaper meeting in high and giddy spirits, shouted, “I’m home!” She tapped on Ardis’s door on the way to her room.

“What is it?” Ardis called. Sarah opened the door. She wore a burgundy skirt, burgundy and white striped sweater, and penny loafers, and her hair formed a curly fountain from a pony tail atop her head, an attempt at poise her body couldn’t match. Her legs twisted together in only momentary balance. Ardis felt awkwardness was a family trait.

“Did you throw up?” she said cheerfully..

“No, I didn’t.”

“Did you faint?”

“No.”

Ardis could tell Sarah stayed by the door just in case.

“Are you going to?”

“I’m feeling better, thanks.”

“Well, see ya.” She grinned.

“See ya,” As Sarah closed the door, Ardis thought of the Hindus and realized what being untouchable must feel like. She wondered whether Bhutan had untouchables, and if Buddhists considered anyone untouchable.

## Examination

After dinner, Ardis readied a stack of books on her desk for school the next day and, for the January cold, added a red plaid kilt to the layers of clothes on her chair, along with a black turtleneck, to which she attached a gold cat pin with red rhinestone eyes, its body curved with peaks like a “W.” Ardis wanted a similar ability to slink gracefully through school hallways.

But the next morning, as usual, she carried a few too many books to arrive with grace at the bus stop. Changing America and Concepts in Geometry slid from her pile, as she picked through ice patches in her yard. When she bent to retrieve them, her above-the-knee socks slid toward her ankles. She glanced across the street at the bus stop gathering, where Dirk and Sandy chatted, making carvings in snow banks with their feet. Their conversation puffed smoke signals into the air, the meaning of which Ardis could only guess. They idly watched her retrieve the fallen books as though watching television with the sound off. A few feet away, by the street signpost, Danny shifted from sneaker to sneaker restlessly in the slush, looking up the street for the bus, with bleak anticipation.

Under the bloated gray sky, life went on just like two days before, falling books as inevitable as icy dark swallowing each day early. But Ardis felt somehow different, sickness leaving her a fresh sense of fragility, the possibility of things going wrong. Images from



Wuthering Heights, which she read in middle of the night sleeplessness, hovered around her like dream remnants, like Catherine bedridden by angst.

The bus arrived at the stop soon after she did. She mounted the wet black steps, greeted Mr. Bates, the large, bald bus driver, and parked herself next to Janet, who pulled her purple ski parka closer to make space for her, a striped stocking cap wagging around her head.

“I was gonna call you. I wondered how you were,” she said. “I heard you fainted in history class.”

“Who told you?”

“A few people.”

“It was just a little stomach bug.”

“Ooh.”

“I’m better,” said Ardis, feeling like a leper that oozed. “What’s happening in English?” Janet had the same teacher at a different time.

“We’re into Jane Eyre. We talked about limits on women’s behavior in Victorian times,” she said pursing her lips in mock primness. “But the highlight of my day is pig guts. I pretty much know where everything is inside Boris. Funny that’s what we look like too, except when we’re alive all this stuff gushes around. We just keep it covered with skin and clothes so you don’t notice.”

“Not funny enough to go into all the details.” Ardis began to notice the jiggling of the bus and felt a dizziness boring in from where the seat rattled her back. She leaned forward a little and tried to shield her mind from her own intestinal turmoil.

“Oops!” Janet giggled. She really liked science and Ardis liked her earthy rationality, and often shared her silliness, singing along with songs on the radio and dancing around in Janet’s living room, but now she was irritating.

“So what else is happening?” asked Ardis. “I heard Kevin and Becca are having a good time with their pig.” “I don’t know what they’re doing with that pig, but I see them walk out together.” “Oh, great.”

“Maybe they’re just friends.”

“I was thinking about asking him to the Sadie Hawkins dance.”

“Really? That’s gutsy.”

“Very funny.”

“Oops.”

“What do you think he’d do?”

“Who knows? Do you talk to him much?”

“Not really, no.”

“So what do you like about him?”

“Just the way he is. How he looks, that blocky solidness. The way he walks. Though he’s a little stiff sometimes. He’s quiet, but he looks like he’s thinking about something. And he smiles like he sees something funny about things.” She paused. “And I like the way he looks at me.”

“How does he look at you?”

“Well--” What really was there? “Like I understand what he’s smiling about. But maybe he does that with everyone. Does he do that with you?”

“We don’t look at each other much. I don’t look much at smug, blocky guys with eyes staring like high beams. Those are great credentials, Ardis. Silence. Smiling. ;Nice walk. Did you check out his run?”

“Well I think they mean something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I’d like to find out.”

“Let me know when you do.”

“If you weren’t seeing Brad, would you ask someone?”

“Maybe.”

“Who would you ask?”

“Someone who would definitely say yes.”

“That figures.”

“But right now I’m gonna do a little studying. I’ve got a social studies test first period.” On her lap she opened a book striped with yellow highlighter.

. Ardis was left to her nausea, sending warm waves of dizziness through her, mingled with fear. What would she do if it got worse? She heard a girl somewhere behind her talking in confidential tones and then boys’ derisive laughter. They would be talking about her if she threw up on the bus or fainted. She looked out the window at pastel shingled houses and bare trees, like naked nerve ganglia on frozen lawns, crossed by other girls who walked to bus stops unconcerned about falling apart. Just walked to the bus without worrying about anything but unfinished homework or a loose hem. How to return to that? She turned to face the olive green back of the seat in front of her, and read the graffiti—“Forget buses. Ride Grand Funk Railroad,” and “Ride the magic bus,” and “Fuck you Cynthia.” Trying to still her

gut by breathing shallowly. Stay conscious by fixing her eyes on the words, a link with the world. She had to make it to school. Janet's nonchalance seemed strange next to her panic, overheated in her peacoat and scarf. Her clammy hands dampened her gloves from the inside.

Well before the bus finally approached the school driveway, Ardis rose from her seat. Janet looked up, startled from her studies and said, "Where are you going?"

"Out!"

"Better wait til the bus stops!"

Ardis was already lurching dizzily down the aisle, feeling as though at the swirling center of a barber pole, clutching her books, unable to bear the idea of someone delaying her exit. When Mr. Bates finally grasped the big lever and opened the door, she skipped a step and leapt out. She walked briskly to the end of the sidewalk, winding through preoccupied people, meandering, talking, posturing, around to the side of the school, then crunched through grimy drifts at the edge of a parking lot, to the hill overlooking the football field, crowded with people during a game, mercifully empty now. Her boots mid-shin deep with a lump of snow in one, melting by her ankle, she stood there, hugging her books, and suddenly realized that, in her rush, centrifugal force seemed to have settled her insides. She'd left the spiraling barber pole behind somewhere. She trudged back to the school front doors, where traffic thinned as the bell for homeroom was about to ring, and headed for the pay phone in the hallway by the gym. While the phone rang at her house and she waited for her mother to answer, she saw Kevin walk by on the far side of the hallway, part of the mass rush to sit down before the bell rang, like musical chairs. But to her he was like some escaped fragment of her imagination, an intimate belonging blowing around in a windstorm. He waved to her and she waved back, and as her mother answered and he disappeared, she tried

to decode the expression on his face.

At home Ardis receded into her own diversions. After trading school clothes for sweatshirt and jeans, she perched on her bed with *Wuthering Heights* for a while, then returned to soap operas to see if the woman hit by the car survived, who hit her and why, and how the other woman dealt with finding her husband and sister suspiciously together. She sought relief from these dilemmas in her crossword puzzles, though accompanied by the ebb and flow of musical woe and elation from WBEE, the local rock station. WBEE had a contest in which they played the first three notes to a song, and whoever called and guessed the song right that day would win tickets to see Creedence Clearwater Revival at Freed Auditorium.

For Ardis, the three notes usually roused some semi-formed memory, which she let recede again, a slimy hippo's back emerging, then again sinking lazily into her mind's murk. But this morning she realized the notes came from the Association song "Cherish," which, even when alone, provoked embarrassment. Always the last song played at school dances, it was the signal for serious slow dance coupling, and her signal to flee, to avoid being seen adrift by those who rejected her, or approached by those whose interest was brazen insult. In her mind, she saw Kevin avoiding her gaze during "Cherish." Though there were the occasional clues that he liked her, the way he opened his eyes and looked straight at her when they exchanged notebooks. But if she asked him to go with her to that dance and he said no, that look would disappear.

Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* would never put herself in this position, nor would it be necessary. . Why did she, Ardis, have to be the one to make contact with Kevin? She returned to reading *Wuthering Heights* in search of clues about this insufficiency.

The next morning, Ardis again felt chilled and queasy in the morning, with a temperature of 100.2 and stayed home, and again the morning after, and the morning after that. After a week of this routine, when her father brought in the bottle of Pepto-Bismol one morning, Ardis noticed his particularly decisive look, the inward whirl of his gaze as he looked at her, suggesting to Ardis that he'd discussed her with her mother.

"How are you feeling?"

"Not so good."

"We think it's time Dr. Brunhoff got a look at you. So I made an appointment for tomorrow morning. Okay.?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Don't you want to find out what's wrong with you?"

"I guess so." For Ardis, going to the doctor always seemed like an obstacle on the way to getting better.

The next day, when Ardis's father climbed into his red Volkswagen with his tan brief case to go to work at Kistman Memorial Hospital, Ardis resignedly climbed in on the other side, lugging her math book, crossword puzzles, and *Wuthering Heights*-- something for any mood or mental capacity, plus a bottle of Pepto-Bismol for emergencies, in her purse.

"Have you had any other symptoms you haven't mentioned?" her father asked, once on the road in their metal bubble.

Ardis looked straight ahead, wondering if her father was being thorough, or if this was a trick question. "Nothing I can think of." His knowledge about her inner workings, while convenient, could be oppressive.

When they entered the hospital, a foreboding structure of hard angles, hard materials, and overwhelming height, she walked quickly to keep up with her father's brisk pace. These hallways seemed to be his natural habitat, and his face took on a kind of authoritative compassion that Ardis was proud to accompany but hated to need.

As usual, she surveyed the scene for the approach of damaged bodies, a wariness tinged with curiosity. This had been her habit as long as she could remember, always afraid of seeing something she wouldn't be able to erase from her mind, just as she avoided looking at squashed worms on the sidewalk. She couldn't now remember any such indelible image, beyond what she'd seen in her father's medical books of contorted, mottled, grizzled, pocked, hairy and hairless people, staring blankly from the pages, resigned to being models of deformity. Mostly what she saw in the hallways was people sitting in wheelchairs or lying on gurneys, sometimes with metal and tubing attached to their arms or nose. But their passivity disturbed Ardis. She couldn't imagine accepting that fate quietly.

By a set of three black doorway placards labelled Brunhoff, Barton and Pugliese, her father opened the door to a large waiting room, lit fluorescently and lined with occupied chairs and intermittent tables piled with magazines that no longer lay flat, thumbed through so many times. She scanned the people waiting for doctors, from two small girls in stained overalls whining angrily at each other by their mother's feet, to a bulky complacent man with sparse, slicked back hair, and dappled skin that lay in pouches and folds, reading Car World magazine. She wondered how doctors felt attending to these people, tapping their knees, looking into their open mouths at their throats, smelling their breath and sweat, feeling bare protruding bellies, pimply backs, odd skin textures, or putting their fingers into wounds and incisions. Ardis wondered why anyone would want to do that.

“Dad, aren’t there people who are so repulsive you don’t want to touch them?” she whispered.

Her father’s brows converged.

“For a doctor, all a person’s visible characteristics are potential clues about what’s going on in their body.”

“How about how they smell?”

“That too.”

The mother with feuding little girls looked at Ardis and her father curiously. The car magazine reader two seats away seemed oblivious.

“So you never felt grossed out?”

“Ardis, these people come to me because they need help!”

“So you never find them unpleasant.”

“I’m looking from a different angle.”

“What about dissecting cadavers?”

“Well, that was a little jarring at first. In my med school class a couple of students fainted.”

“How about you?”

“I might have felt a little woozy at first,” he conceded. “But it was fascinating. We used to—”

“Dad! That woman!” She pointed over his shoulder to an obese pasty-faced woman in a flower-print dress, sliding down in her chair, her eyes rolled back, her limbs flailing, foamy spit and primitive sounds coming from her mouth.



Ardis's father turned, leapt up reflexively, and stepped over to help, as nurses closed in on the hubbub. Ardis headed for the doorway, where she watched the huddle of stooping people, whose bodies now hid the convulsing woman, except for her swollen twitching feet. When the gurney rolled in beside Ardis, she stepped into the hallway like a fugitive, and made her way to the restroom. Even in its emptiness, smelling like paper towels and strange people's excrement, it provided a dubious haven in this place where bodies were liable to go out of control. She thought of Lulu with her open entrails. Hot and dizzy, she took a drink of Pepto-Bismol, feeling like a drunk with a bottle in a bag. Then she combed her hair, a black cloud frizzing around her shoulders in the over-heated air, and found a usualness in her appearance, though pale and shadowy under fluorescence, that settled her.

She tentatively approached the waiting room, where the tumult had vanished like a hallucination. So much distress passing through, leaving so little residue. What else had happened here?

Her father stood just inside the door, anxiously. "Where were you Ardis? They're calling you." He nodded diplomatically at a nurse by the doorway to the examining rooms.

Dr. Brunhoff didn't seem to mind looking in Ardis's throat nearly as much as she minded him poking at it with what always looked to her like a popsicle stick. She pushed it away. She'd peed and bled as directed by the nurse, but she refused to gag for him.

"Can't you look without sticking something in?" she protested.

"I suppose so," he said, a kindly fellow, with wavy gray hair, bulbous nose, and thick horn-rimmed glasses, whose nearness felt cloying to Ardis at the moment. "I don't see anything interesting in there anyway. How about lying on your back for me with your knees up?"

Ardis swung her legs, which had been hanging over the edge of the examining table, up on top of it. He slid his cool hand under her paper gown and pushed the tips of his fingers into her stomach.

“This hurt?”

“No.” She looked up into his magnified eyes and then closed hers.

“How about this?”

“A little.”

“How about this?”

“A little sore.”

“This?”

“No.”

“Any pains in your stomach at any time of day?”

“Well no.”

“Good. Could you could answer a few questions for me?”

“Okay.” She sat up on the edge of the examining table, feeling in the gown like a lost angel from a school play. He sat in an arm chair by a table topped with thumbled magazines.

“Do you have a boyfriend, Ardis?”

“No.”

“Are you dating someone?”

“No.”

“Have you had sexual intercourse with anyone?”

“No.” At this, Ardis felt pride in the possibility that she could have, shame in that she had no idea how that would ever come about.

“Is there any possibility you might be pregnant?” He tipped his head forward humbly, as though to signal his safety as confidante. But Ardis began to feel his proximity, his smell blended of cologne, sweat and disinfectant, and became suddenly aware there must be genitalia under his clothes.

“No.”

“Are you enjoying school?”

“Sometimes.”

“Are you having any particular problems with it?”

“Nothing in particular.”

He looked at her intently.

“We’ll have to see what the blood tests show, but I don’t see anything thus far that should keep you out of school any longer.”

“Okay.”

“You can get dressed now.”

When he left, Ardis pulled on her jeans and sweater quickly to avoid any further nearly naked encounters and went to meet her father in the waiting room, only to be told by the receptionist that he was in Dr. Brunhoff’s office. When he emerged, he looked at her perplexedly.

“You all set?” he said too cheerily. He walked a little slower than usual, more deliberative, as they headed down the hallway.

“I talked to Dr. Brunhoff for a few minutes while you were getting dressed,” he said.

“He’s a nice fellow, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” she said obligatorily.

“He suggested that if the blood tests come back negative, which he thinks they will, a psychiatrist might be able to help you with your stomach troubles better than he could. How do you feel about that, Ardis?”

“That’s disgusting, Dad. You can’t figure out what’s wrong with me. So you’ll pay someone to talk me out of being sick?” Ardis dourly watched a bald doctor walk by going the other way, stethoscope swinging on his chest.

“That’s not what this is about, Ardis.”

. They walked on through the hospital hallways in silence, Ardis watching passersby uneasily.

## Probe

When they reached her father's office on the fifth floor, a small oblong room lined with books, and models of the heart that looked like convoluted musical instruments, she retreated into a leather chair in a corner with *Wuthering Heights*. Her father disappeared among students in white lab coats in his laboratory next door, where, when Ardis was younger, she had spun herself dizzy on tall stools and played with doomed mice and giant frogs. She could hear students murmuring the gibberish of biochemistry among themselves, which reassured her that someone understood what went on under her skin. Sometimes her father came back to the office with a student, one of whom, pale and slender with gold wire rims and blonde curls set far back on his forehead, winked at Ardis.

"Hey, how are you?" he said, probably not remembering her name. They had met before.

"Pretty good," she said, wishing to say more, but good was true at the moment. She liked meeting medical students, her awkward junior high history left behind. With these people heading for a helpful life, she could reinvent herself. She'd meant to do that in junior high--leave her volatile elementary school past behind and become the quiet belle of pubescent halls. But some part of her rebelled, a jack-in-the-box wound up by daily humdrum. Like that day in math class when the click of the clock seemed to punctuate what Mrs. Webster was saying about logarithms. Ardis tried to contain the hilarity fizzing in her

chest by thinking sober thoughts about her dead grandfather, but instead saw him chuckling at her. She looked down at her notebook, quivering with quashed giggles like a washing machine on spin cycle. Kevin and others sitting nearby laughed at her, rippling disruption through the class. Constant dignity was difficult.

She read to the point where Heathcliff ran off with Catherine's sister-in-law. Then, at her limit for even fictional folly, she put the novel on the floor and found relief in the rationality of solving for  $x$  and  $y$  in her math homework. Finally, she took a break to watch the futile buzzing of a fly against a window. As she sat with her back against one leather chair arm, legs in bellbottom jeans draped over the other arm, chewing a fingernail, thinking of freeing herself from the fly's frustration by opening the window, Roger Goodman stepped in, eyeing the bookshelves behind her.

Ardis hastily dignified her position, pulling her finger from her mouth as she swung her feet to the floor. Roger, an aspiring pediatrician, looked like the earthy boyfriend of a flighty sitcom character, with his wavy bronze hair and gently shrewd expression. Last year he had visited her father at home to drop off a paper and stayed for coffee. He ended up inviting Ardis and Benjamin to come ice skating with him and his nephew, Gary.

Ardis had skated before on the pond at Beth Jenkins' farm, but this big rink in a city park swarmed with lunging, spinning skaters, many of them young black men, propelled by a relentless undertow of music-- Booker T. and the MG's, Sly and the Family Stone, the Supremes—that also somehow informed her limbs on how to balance, turn and glide, with few spills. Roger skated calmly nearby, keeping an eye on his charges with amused detachment. Occasionally he skated alongside to demonstrate a move or offer a hand to the fallen, which he did so casually that no self-consciousness resulted that would otherwise

make Ardis stumble. An older black boy gave her a few pointers too, with a friendliness uncommon in her school world. The skating rink lodged in her mind as a place removed from her awkward daily life, a festive refuge where her parts moved in synch.

Afterwards, they drank hot chocolate in paper cups at a picnic table, and on the way home Ardis sat on the blue vinyl bench seat in front, savoring Roger's nearness and the "Sounds of Silence" on the radio, wondering about the inner sounds of his silence, as Benjamin and Gary sat in back talking about baseball cards. She felt the liberation of the rink, whenever she saw him.

"Hi Ardis," he said. "Playing hooky today huh?"

"I've been sick."

"Oh yeah? You're father can't fix you up?" He took a fat reference book from the shelf.

"He can't even figure out what's wrong with me."

"Can you?" He thumbed through the book.

"Well no. But I know there's something wrong with me. He thinks it's in my head."

Roger looked at her. "Sickness can start in the head sometimes.

"Mine is in my stomach."

"You're sure?"

"Yes," she said with finality. "So are you a doctor yet?"

"Not quite. I'm closer to being a husband. I'm getting married next month."

"Oh, congratulations," she said, searching for the part of her that meant it.

"Thanks Ardis. See you later." He left with the book.

Ardis wondered what he and his fiance did together. She imagined Roger earnestly approaching a woman whose expression hinted at some cryptic knowledge. She wondered if they went skating.

On the way home, the Volkswagen seemed too small for Ardis, her father and their silence, broken only briefly, abruptly.

“Ardis, I made you an appointment with someone Dr. Brunhoff recommended, Dr. Krasnow. He happened to have a cancellation for tomorrow morning.”

“Is he a psychiatrist?”

“Yes he is.”

Ardis sighed loudly.

“He sounded like a thoughtful man. All you have to do is talk to him.”

“I might not have anything to say to him.”

“Will you at least try to answer his questions?”

“Maybe.”

The next morning Ardis, in tight jeans, furiously red sweater and big domino earrings, sullenly got into the Plymouth station wagon with her mother for the trip to Dr. Krasnow’s office.

“I hear Dr. Krasnow is a good doctor,” her mother said.

“You mean he’s good at getting things out of people forced to sit with him.”

“You weren’t forced.”

“Oh? Then I was volunteered by somebody else.”



“You don’t have to go, Ardis. We can turn around right now. I’ll stop at the Esso station and call and cancel. Is that what you want?”

Ardis knew this not to be an idle threat . Occasionally, impulsively, her mother would change course if the destination suddenly seemed wrong—restaurant, museum, vacation. But this--Ardis felt the cloud of recrimination that would envelop her, and even a sense of missed opportunity, a wisp of curiosity. “I guess it’s a little late to turn back,” she said.

On an avenue lined with stately apartment buildings and discreet shopping plazas, they parked under a bare, contorted oak in front of a flat one story building, like a snow-frosted cafeteria cake with pieces sliced out for alcoves and entrances. One displayed the plaque of Dr. Howard Krasnow. They entered this one and removed their wool coats and gloves. Ardis put hers on the back of a rattan chair in the corner, while her mother talked to the receptionist. She looked through the magazines, Highlights, National Geographic, Life, Time. She opened Time, the cover being John Updike’s face, captioned “The Adulterous Society.” Inside she saw photos of half-naked, desperate-looking Vietnamese running or crumpled and bleeding. Further on, crowds of defiant protesters, looking healthy and vital, held up peace signs and angry signs. Toward the end, Twiggy covered a whole page, standing with long legs crossed beneath a short dress with big flowers, face and abbreviated hair seemingly sculpted in unison, large eyes in a burst of delighted surprise.

Paging back before Twiggy, Ardis found the cover story about John Updike’s novel, Couples. She’d seen this book on the shelves at the Dubowskis’ when she babysat there, and, drawn in by a title that suggested a view of a secret realm that confused and intrigued her, she read a little, about a man watching his wife undress. She imagined how her father might see her mother, lean, verging on leathery, mercurial, matter-of-factly stepping out of her navy

polyester pants and tossing them over a chair. She thought of how someone—Who would it be?—might see her, reaching back to unclip a bra she didn't much need. She returned the book to its place well before anyone got home, not wanting to meet the Bergstroms in that territory. As she began to read the article, she heard her name called.

She looked up to see a compact, robust man with reddish sandy hair and mustache, the extra girth of a lapsed athlete, in a brown suit, jacket hanging open. When she stood and he saw her, she caught his assessment of her as he smiled.

“Hello Ardis. I'm Dr. Krasnow.” His voice blended the deepness of adulthood with a hoarse chord of adolescence. He extended his hand like a peace offering. Ardis shook it obligatorily. “Just follow me,” he said.

She walked behind him on the gray carpet that went everywhere, and saw, in the way his shiny loafers angled out slightly, rocking his stride from side to side, the strut of a junior high boy, stiffened and restrained by age and attire.

At the end of a short hallway, he opened a door to a small office. He crossed the room to sit in a burgundy leather chair behind a desk topped with a pad of yellow paper, framed family photos, and a troll with purple hair facing the mauve velveteen stuffed chair, where he motioned for Ardis to sit.

“So how are you, Ardis?”

“I'm good.”

“I just want you to know everything you say is confidential, unless it sounds like you'll hurt yourself or someone else. Even though your mom's out there, I won't tell her what you say.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So what have you been up to these days in this chilly weather? You like to freeze your tail off in the chair lift line or stay indoors and stay warm?”

“I went skiing a couple of times. I like going down the hill, but it’s too much trouble getting there. I like skating better.”

“Oh, do you skate much?”

“Well no. But I like it better.”

“What do you like that you do a lot of?”

“Read. Listen to music.” She almost said she liked to dance.

“Who do you listen to?”

“Beatles, Stones, Turtles, Monkees.” A smile twisted out.

“All the beasts of the jungle, huh? I’m getting old, I guess. I’ve lost track.

Your father told me you haven’t been feeling well.”

“Sometimes I don’t.”

“How exactly do you feel when you’re not well?”

“Well—” All the “well’s” suddenly lined up askew. A giggle lodged in her throat like an egg about to hatch. A tight smile cracked her impassiveness.

Dr. Krasnow smiled curiously back. “What’s funny?”

Her restraint failed. Something about their futile proximity. She laughed unchecked. He chuckled uncertainly.

Like math class, when her classmates laughed without knowing why, beyond the absurdity of Ardis’s laughter amid the dissection of number sentences. She gathered herself together to answer his question, stopping the kaleidoscope that kept comically recombining what she saw.

“Nothing’s funny,” she finally answered. She looked at him, and saw in his hardy features the beguiling jock he probably once was, and wondered what brought him here. “I guess you’re feeling okay for the moment. That’s a start. How ‘re things in school? How’s eighth grade treating you?”

Ardis came back to the issue in question like a bird hitting a window.

“It’s fine. A lot of homework.”

“So you feel a little overburdened sometimes?”

“No. I get it done eventually. Just kinda keep at it.” She contemplated the doctor’s face. His nose was kind of bulky, but his lips balanced its size with their fullness.

“Do you have many friends at school?”

“I have a few friends.” She looked at his feet, crossed at the ankles under the desk.

“Are there any kids you don’t like?”

“A few.” She felt a surge of dizziness and nausea. She worried about being trapped there for scrutiny.

“Do any of them give you any trouble?”

“Mm, no, not really.”

“A little trouble?”

To still the wobbly room, she focused on the framed portrait on his desk of an attractive blonde woman, hair in short orchestrated waves, tailored eyebrows, smiling with cheerful self-assurance. She wouldn’t have, or even comprehend, Ardis’s difficulties. She must be Dr. Krasnow’s wife, Ardis guessed from the gold band on his short thick ring finger. His left hand rested next to his yellow pad, while his right wrote occasionally with a half black, half silver ball point pen. His fingernails were short and neat, unlike Ardis’s unevenly

chewed nails, hidden now in the palms of her interwoven hands in her lap. Ardis imagined how Dr. Krasnow talked to the blonde woman, how he looked at her, when they undressed, with an unrestrained interest that drew her in.

“Does anyone give you just a little trouble?” he repeated.

“What do you mean by trouble?” she said, her wool sweater prickling her clammy neck. A wrong move and she feared she would throw up or pass out.

“Does anyone bother you or tease you?”

“Sometimes. It happens to everybody.”

“What happens to everybody?”

“People get teased.”

“Can you give an example?”

“You had to be there.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.” Dizziness and nausea eddied around her.

“Sounds like you know. Can’t you give me a clue?”

“Nothing you’d understand. Is it okay if I go to the bathroom?”

“Sure. Just a couple of doors down on the right. Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Ardis left as casually as she could, and walked briskly to the bathroom where, as she closed the door, she saw, in the full length mirror behind it, that one domino earring was tangled in her hair, and the zipper was part way down on her jeans. But the dizziness abated. Maybe it was just too hot in that room.

When she came back, she found the temperature to be much the same as in the bathroom, but dizziness enveloped her again.

“Where were we?” he said, smiling a smile that would have disarmed cheerleaders, his eyes squinting with a trace of mischief, as well as concern.

“I don’t remember.” Ardis couldn’t avoid being charmed. She couldn’t let him know about her sickness. It would be repulsive to him, and she would become more of an oddity to be investigated.

“Can you tell me about your friends?” he said.

“Mostly I talk to Janet and MaryAnne and Stephanie.”

“What’s Janet like?”

“She’s smart. My mother always says she’s sensible. Never gets into trouble. She’s a little silly sometimes. But so am I.” Ardis smiled and Dr. Krasnow smiled back like he knew just what she meant. The dizziness receded for a few moments.

“What do you do together?”

“Normal stuff. Talk. Go shopping at the plaza. Listen to music.” In her mind she saw herself and Janet listening to Creedence Clearwater Revival and dancing across stodgy furniture, but decided not to mention it, though she was tempted. A part of her wanted to amuse him.

“Is MaryAnne sensible too?”

“My mother doesn’t think so.”

“Do you?”

“She’s sensible in her own way,” Ardis said, dizziness hovering like a bee around a flower. She took a careful breath to steady herself.

“What do you mean?”

“She gets her homework done and she finds ways to have fun.”

“How does she have fun?”

“She goes out.” The bee circled closely around her.

“What does she do when she goes out?”

“Different things, I guess.” Ardis didn’t know exactly, though MaryAnne was blithely suggestive about it. Because she usually went with a boy, it was probably things Ardis had never done, but wanted to try. She wondered how much of this conversation would somehow get back to her parents, and why she should talk to this doctor, and who was he anyway?

“How come you’re a psychiatrist?” she said.

She saw his eyes shift to the wall next to her, but they quickly returned to her face. “I like talking to people.”

He said this earnestly, but it sounded to Ardis like an old reliable answer.

“There’s lots of ways to talk to people,” she said. “What made you choose this one?”

Ardis breathed and moved back in her chair, out of the bee’s orbit for the moment.

“I like situations where people try to tell the truth.”

“Why?”

“Because people waste a lot of time and energy hiding things.”

“What did you hide when you were thirteen?”

“Let’s see. I hid lots of things.”

“Like what?”

“Well--.For one, I was afraid of being mowed down on the football field.” He looked at her.

She liked hearing him talk about himself and look at her.

“How about you?” he said. “What are you hiding?”

“Oh everybody hides a lot. I can’t quite hide enough. But what did you do about being afraid?”

“ I pretended I wasn’t afraid and went out and played anyway. And you, what do you wish you could hide?”

“Everything. Did you get mowed down?”

“Sometimes. What do you mean, `everything?’”

“I don’t know. Just silliness. What was it like getting mowed down?”

“It hurts. You hit the ground hard under some boulder of a guy. Once I broke my nose. Another time I cracked a rib. I had a concussion. I didn’t want to go out there sometimes.” He paused. “Now I told you what I hid. Can you tell me what you want to hide?”

He looked humbled. She felt a little sorry for him, for all football players with their fearful faces conveniently helmeted.

“Soon I’ll tell you. But first I want to know--you didn’t really like playing football?”

“I loved some things and hated others.”

“What did you like?”

“I liked being part of the team. And all the attention.”

“Lots of girls paid attention to you?”

“I guess they did.”

“Did you have a girlfriend?”

“Sometimes. Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No.” Now he receded into a realm of intimacy that she was denied for unknown reasons.



“Does that bother you?”

“Sometimes.”

“What do you do about it?”

“There’s nothing to do about it really.”

She liked his ruddy cheeks, roughened by stubble traces, that creased when he talked. She thought of her plan to invite Kevin to the Sadie Hawkins Dance and how novel it would be to confide in an attractive man about this attraction. But an emissary of her parents?

“Now you’re a pretty girl, Ardis. You might just consider what signals you give boys. Maybe you’re aloof and pushing them away. Could that be part of the problem?”

If only that were true. She liked this delusion. And she warmed to his compliment, suddenly feeling a buoyance in her body, a balance in her features that often felt awry. She looked away from his face, over his shoulder to a window, where she watched a squirrel nervously nibbling a nut.

“Oh, I don’t think that’s the reason.” She smiled slyly.

“What is the reason?”

“I probably don’t act like they expect me to.”

“How do you act?”

“Unexpectedly.” She started to laugh and he joined her. But she felt like she could laugh forever. She saw all her uncontrollable folly—falling books, sudden temper, star spangled stretch pants, unretractable, misguided remarks, unstoppable laughter. She stopped her breath to make herself stop laughing when he did. “What kinds of things do you do unexpectedly?” he said.

“I laugh.”

“Laughing’s good. People need to laugh more.”

“But I laugh too much.”

“How do you know it’s too much?”

“Because other people aren’t always laughing along with me.”

“So?”

“So I seem silly.”

“Why? Maybe you just have a bigger supply of humor. What would you rather do?”

“Stop laughing.”

“Can you? Do you think that would make a difference?”

She imagined again the appeal of cryptic silence. “Maybe, but there’s other things I do.”

“Like?”

“My clothes. Things I say. Things I do.”

“Do you need a rubber stamp of approval for everything you wear, say and do?”

“No. But I don’t want disapproval.”

“How do you know anyone disapproves?”

“How they look at me. Their expressions.”

“You’re sure you know what those expressions mean?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know you know?” He smiled. She laughed.

“If they didn’t mean what I think they mean, I’d be going out like MaryAnne.”

She noticed that although he continued to look at her, his attention retreated inward.

He must not understand what really happens in school, she thought, the extent of her social

clumsiness. So she could at least enjoy her mysteriousness for him. She liked having him probe her.

“Even if they did think whatever you think they’re thinking, it doesn’t matter. Boys respond to confidence. I know. I was a boy once.” He smiled. “Now can you tell me about your sickness?”

Sickness. She hadn’t been feeling sick for a while, but now she felt a wave of dizziness, the dozing monster roused. But she was becoming accustomed to its presence and habits. Though it threatened, she felt she could put it off, at least for a while.

“I’ve had a flu that’s been going around and my parents don’t believe it.”

“How do you know other people have it?”

“A boy threw up in my English class.”

“That doesn’t sound widespread.”

“It spread to me.”

“Do you feel sick now?”

“Not this minute. But I did earlier.”

“Earlier today?”

“Uh-huh.”

“In this room?”

“A little.”

“But you’re okay now?”

“Yes.” A twitter of dizziness challenged her certainty.

“Good. Let’s see how you feel this week, and we’ll talk again next week.”

He rolled back his chair, preparing to stand. Ardis hastily gathered the straps of her leather shoulder bag from beside her chair and stood. As he rose, he transformed from a boy-man who had slipped inside her world to a doctor getting ready to greet his next patients, and eventually return to his home and wife and their private world.

### After Math

“How was it?” Ardis’s mother asked, as soon as they pulled away from the curb.

“Strange.”

“Why?”

“He’s a stranger. I was expected to just go into a room and talk to a stranger,” said Ardis, but what she felt was the strangeness of explaining to her mother what had happened in the room.

“Would you like to go again next week?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.” Now Dr. Krasnow seemed like a periscope, commissioned by her parents to peer into her thoughts

“If you don’t want his help, what will you do? You can’t just stay home forever.”

“I don’t know, Mom. Just leave me alone for a while.”

“I’ve left you alone for three weeks now.”

“Can we stop at the library?”

The Rockford village library satisfied Ardis’s dog-like craving for reassuring spaces with its narrow aisles smelling of smudged plastic book covers. Her mother rounded up mystery stories and books on metaphysics, her new passions. But Ardis looked for clues to a better life on the shelf. She glanced over rows of fiction by authors whose last names came

early in the alphabet, pulling down Emma , Rebecca, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, They must be stories of women leading lives more adventurous, and sought after, than hers.

When they got home, Ardis stopped in the kitchen to make a Swiss cheese sandwich, then scurried to her room to avoid further questions and suggestions. As she ate, she looked out her window beyond the patch on her screen that was between her and nothing but a frozen vacant day; everyone else was at school. She looked at the books stacked on her desk, like channels to change to, and picked out Maggie, the thinnest. The cover said Maggie was a poor, desperate city girl, left on her own. Somehow that life sounded good, to be out on the street, stripped of all connection and expectation of propriety, a lone target of lust without the embarrassment of family who would pry. Curling up in small hidden places at night, like a cat, until she found herself in the bed of some savvy man.

She put Maggie aside to return to *Wuthering Heights*, where Catherine was lost on the moor. But lying on her bed, forming an undotted question mark around the book, the hand propping up her head numbed in prickly sleep and her neck ached. She moved to the stuffed chair and leaned back against the arm, laying the book on her thighs, and reached for a caramel from a bag under the chair. Chewing it immersed her in Heathcliff's pursuit of Catherine, but once swallowed the sweetness withered into staleness and she closed her eyes and drowsily merged with Catherine, wandering in a foggy bog among gloomy sick people and doctors exuding distant white-coated concern.

She retreated from this by opening her eyes and staring at the page, but in her mind saw Dr. Krasnow and talked to him about things left unsaid she wanted to explain-- Janet's sensible boyfriend David with his round eyes, hair in angelic swirls, who never seemed to even imagine mischief. He was the kind she felt like kicking for being too good. The

breakfasts with Maryanne and her friends, jokes over French bread about French kisses.

What exactly were French kisses? She'd like to hear Dr. Krasnow explain.

A slammed door roused her from torpor. She heard Sarah's voice in quick chirpy tones and no one else's, meaning Sarah was already on the phone, in motion while Ardis idled in sheets sandy with toast crumbs, crinkling with candy wrappers, her mind soaked in radio music, worry, and dead writers' fantasies. Compared to Ardis's medicinal swamp, Sarah's world of school routine seemed light. Ardis feared but missed the hallways full of all kinds of fleshy forms and costumes, the tense closeness of classes. And the Sadie Hawkins Dance was coming up in a week and a half.

Ardis got up and went to the mirror behind her door and saw that both domino earrings were now caught in her hair, which was flattened on one side and tangled. The zipper on her jeans had worked itself all the way down. She pulled it up, pulled out her earrings and combed her hair, which seemed to right her features for the moment. She went to the living room where her mother sat reading *The Transcendent Mind*, a bowl of purple grapes on a table next to her. In the kitchen beyond she could see Sarah's legs, in black tights and loafers, crossed and resting on a kitchen chair. Ardis admired the symmetry and sturdiness of Sarah's legs, compared to the crookedness of her own.

Sarah was saying, "I don't think he really likes her. Do you?"

Ardis wondered who as she stood in front of her mother, who looked up at her after a moment.

. "I think I'll try going back to school tomorrow, Mom."

"I'm glad to hear that Ardis," she said.

Ardis heard the hope and doubt as background static in her mother's voice, and returned to her room to escape it.

#

As she arrived at the bus stop, a cautiously small book load in her arms, Ardis noticed Dirk looking at her with mild interest. Maybe that was because he wasn't talking to Sandy and looking at Ardis sideways, since Sandy wasn't there. His glance reminded her of nine-year-old Dirk in the doghouse, although his embarrassed self-consciousness was now long gone, and his flutish voice had dropped down, as though lowered by involvement in more serious and secret matters. His earnestness broken up by bursts of playfulness that had appealed to Ardis at eight, began appealing to other girls too. A cocksureness took root in him after a while, distancing her. Now she found him compelling in a different way. Rather than being drawn to his guilelessness, she was drawn to the worldliness that displaced it.

Today, however, as she walked down the bus aisle, she felt the power and remove of having had her own private adventure while everyone else went routinely through their days at school.

"Howdy," said Janet, as Ardis slid into the accustomed place next to her. "You back for good this time?"

"Yeah," said Ardis, crumpling the thought of sickness like messy math homework. "So what's new?"



“Just stupid things.” Janet smiled, but looked elsewhere, the tassel on her stocking cap bouncing as she turned to face forward. “I ‘m having a little tiff with David.”

Ardis hadn’t heard from Janet for a few days and could see she was caught up in her own private adventures. “Fight? I’ve never heard of him fighting.”

“Ardis, he’s not the wimp you think he is.”

“I didn’t say he was a wimp.”

“You thought it loudly then.”

“So what’s the fight about?”

“He doesn’t want to go to the Sadie Hawkins dance.”

“Why not?”

“He says he doesn’t really like to dance.”

“Yeah I guess he is a wimp. No I didn’t mean that. So what’s the big deal?”

“I wanted to go. I like getting dressed up and dancing and seeing who’s doing what with who.”

“Then ask someone else or go alone.”

“It would start trouble to ask someone, and I don’t want to go alone.”

“I go to things alone.”

“Well you don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Is it such a sin to be alone?”

“It’s not a sin, but isn’t it better to be with someone?”

“I guess so.” Ardis felt suddenly deflated, like the moment when a dance ended and she scurried off with the lights going up on torn colored tissue hanging from ceiling pipes, dented soda cans, girls’ overdone makeup, and solitary people.

Janet looked out the window as they passed one of the few fields occupied by cows amid sprouting suburbia. Ardis followed her gaze out the window, admiring the pert lines of her profile--long eyelashes, short nose--straining to imagine Janet and David alone and the attraction between them. He seemed so compliant, his body so soft. She supposed what he offered her was friendly cushioning and sole witness to his lust, whatever that was like. Maybe a subtle shift in his eyes from the usual hesitance to boldness, followed by some kind of forwardness. And Janet, with her lively, peppery self might provoke things in him that Ardis never saw. Ardis liked the idea of being allowed to see a concealed part of someone, but sometimes wondered if she lacked the ability to find it. Much about Kevin eluded her, though in their fleeting contact, she felt tantalized by his possible willingness to reveal it.

“What do you like about David?” Ardis said finally.

“He’s smart and I can talk to him honestly. No games. And I like his kind of body, even though you don’t. It means something different to me. There’s someone in it I like.”

“I guess I want to get to honesty, but I can’t help wanting to play first, where just a little truth shows,” said Ardis. She thought of summer clothes, like halter tops that bare shoulders and backs.

“Yeah but you never get past the games and fantasies.”

“Well, maybe there’s something wrong with me.”

“Nothing you can’t fix with a little effort if you wanted to.”

Ardis watched Marcy Keller, a round-cheeked girl with Prince Valiant style hair come up the bus steps, and as she walked down the aisle, sizing up seat occupants, deciding where to sit, Ardis, out of the side of her eye, watched her short skirt roll across her thick thighs, and thought about how earthy she was, and how she fit with her boyfriend, Bob

Inglehoff, a nerdy electronics club member, tall, thin, acne pocked triangular cheeks, sort of handsome but uninteresting. Just regular people, somehow compatible. Funny how other people fit together. Dr. Krasnow and his wife. She wanted to tell Janet about Dr. Krasnow, but not now in a rush.

In school, Janet turned right as Ardis headed straight down the hall toward the athletic trophies. As the crowd flowed into homerooms, she felt both comforted and discomfited by the stew of school smells—the usual perfumes, Ambush and Tabu, sweat, breath, sneakers, cafeteria food, and chlorine wafting from the pool.

In homeroom, she worked on algebra problems, looking at shapes of numbers and letters while planning her entrance into math class next period. How she would invite Kevin to the Sadie Hawkins Dance. But trying to halt that inner rehearsal because it made her nervous and she wanted to feel normal. Math variables and math class kept colliding in her mind.

Dr. Krasnow's voice saying, "Confidence is what counts," surfaced like a recurring phrase in an eight-ball. But confidence itself, like a constellation, was sometimes distinct, sometimes dissolved in stellar disorder. As she approached room 203 for math, in the other loop of the low-ceilinged figure eight formed by the school's hallways, her surefooted pace faltered and that old difficulty of having lost the rhythm of walking returned to her hips and legs. She saw Jon Goodlow slinking through the hall toward her, wearing pants that clung to his thin legs, wrinkled shirt-tails fluttering behind, like in sixth grade. Although his body and limbs had lengthened, he hunched covertly like his friends. He had his own rubbery rendition though, an anarchy of limbs that intrigued Ardis, along with the way his mischief had become wry melancholy, an anchor sunken into his eyes. He seemed always to be coming

out of school bathrooms with a distant half-grin, smelling smokey, a sly sensuality about him. At dances she saw him coming and going in dented noisy cars driven by older kids, always looking preoccupied like they had some better destination further on.

She heard that Jon's parents broke up, that his stockbroker father ran off with a client. That sort of family undoing intrigued Ardis, the idea of being liberated from the molecular bonds of her parents' marriage. Though she didn't want, couldn't imagine that chilliness between them, like being characters in *Couples*. Seeing the spilled entrails would embarrass her, like opening their bedroom door and finding them naked.

As he passed, Jon smirked and waved glumly, the old malice buried in silent irony. They never spoke anymore, though her sixth grade humiliation hovered between them..

She walked on toward room 203 oddly steadied by Jon's attention., but wavered again when she stepped into the room and saw Kevin in his second row seat leaning toward Corinne Albright, showing her something in his notebook and smiling. He turned to look at Ardis as she rounded the desk arm on her chair to sit down.

"Hey you're back!" he said.

"I guess I am," she said, trying to smile, but feeling a twitch in her lower lip. Kevin went back to explaining to Corinne about solving for three variables at once, something about if you could find out enough about two of the variables, you could find the identity of the third one. Ardis took Maggie: Girl of the Streets from her purse where she'd stashed it for emergencies. Extreme as Maggie's troubles were, though, funny how they seemed distant and small compared to sitting next to Kevin while he explained math to Corinne.

But he had noticed, maybe felt her absence, and interrupted himself to greet her. On the way out she would ask him. If he rejected her, there was always the big world out there

where Maggie had been, a newer version with more options, more variables, like algebra.

Though it was Thursday, this was her reckless Ruby Tuesday.

But when Mr. Sigmund walked in, closed the door and began collecting the homework with his usual impassive look, the moment began to impinge. For forty-five minutes she would be visible, just like everyone else. But they were used to it. While liking the possibility for contact, Ardis feared the consequences of any sort of foolishness. Her face began to feel warm as though singled out for heat by the fluorescent rectangles above, and the old internal tornado stirred, blowing her insides around like loose litter, threatening to drive her from the room in a gust of nausea and dizziness.

But as the storm gathered, she saw the cycle that would ensue. Her mother wearily picking her up at school; her father's concerned scrutiny, maybe leading to some uncomfortable medical procedure and further psychic probing. She thought of Dr. Krasnow with his fear of football. The danger was to become afraid of what should be taken for granted, the seed of a weed blowing into a garden like dandelion fluff. Which reminded her of Danny Burke and his humiliation.

She breathed in, which only made her dizzier.

"Ardis! Welcome back. Good to see you kept up with the homework," Mr. Sigmund said with the half-smile that never cleared his brow of Bassett hound furrows.

Ardis grinned tight-lipped gratitude, thought of possible responses—"It was easy!" "No problem!"—and came up with nothing as her moment passed.

"For today you should have read about algorithms," he said, now looking into all faces and none in particular.

But when the spotlight moved on, Ardis found her inner maelstrom had moved on too, a reprieve. She refocused like a camera, the distortion of blurry close-up relieved by stepping back. As Mr. Sigmund went on talking, writing equations and underlining terms on the board, her fear that freedom was brief provoked waves of queasiness. But noticing the fickleness of her sickness, she defied it for this moment. And the next moment, as she had with Dr. Krasnow. Sometimes completely forgetting the threat, engaged in the clean logic of math. Or watching a spider web hanging from the ceiling dance erotically, driven by the draft from a heating vent below.

She wondered if it was a good omen because it was dancing, or a ghoulish omen, being a spider web. Toward what outcome were the day's other omens pointing? Looking at the drift of the day, Dirk's silent attention at the bus stop might be a good omen. But what did crossing paths with Jon Goodlow mean, with his black hair and gloom, a black cat of a boy. Then she felt apologetic toward Mars and admitted her perverse attraction to Jon Goodlow. But what would it mean if Kevin turned her down—would it be a warning of worse to come?

She wondered if calamities really did occur in clusters or people just noticed clusters more. She tried to remember if something bad had happened on a day that had been going well otherwise. She searched her memory for sudden misfortune, to see if there had been accompanying mishaps. The day her grandfather suddenly died a year ago had been moody and sullen for her, so the news, while she sat at her desk doing homework, though shocking, was consistent with the gloom of the moment. But she couldn't remember what had predisposed her to feel discouraged. So either she had an inkling of misfortune or her world was headed that way. But why should her grandfather's life be headed toward trouble too?

She thought of Maryanne's older sister, Pam, who had come home from a California college with odd astrological theories about how the world works. She said where planets were when you were born made their movement affect you in particular ways the rest of your life. But then how would they determine that her grandfather would die when she was feeling bad, or that she would see John Goodlow, except maybe to launch her in life with some kind of telepathy.

Would moodiness become a warning, or anxiety a premonition? How would she know if anxiety was unfounded or a whiff of a wind headed her way. And sometimes a phone call, an encounter, an opportunity, a thought, changed her mood entirely.

The mathematics of the moment involved too many variables.

Finally the bell rang, beginning the dance of gathering books and standing, saying goodbye or not, and walking out.

Ardis gathered her books and looked at Kevin who seemed preoccupied as he gathered his. She felt no nausea, just heat and a pure dread.

"See ya, Ardis" he said, waving in her direction, but looking toward the door, as he left.

"Bye," she said, matching his indifference, as she followed him out. But as she watched him walking ahead of her down the hall, she called, "Hey Kevin!"

He looked back like he wondered what he forgot that Ardis had found. Other people were just beginning to come out of classrooms, and an empty space gaped for a moment between them. He looked at her, his blue eyes brightened by the blue plaid of his shirt.

"Would you want to go to the Sadie Hawkins Dance with me?"

“No I don’t think so Ardis. Thanks anyway.” No surprise, no interest in his face, just undented calm. He turned around and continued on in the crowd pressed on by the hall’s peristalsis.