

SUICIDAL MANIACS  
AND  
THE LADY OF SHALOTT

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# Part I

*On either side of the river lie  
Long fields of barley and of rye,  
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;  
And through the field the road runs by  
    To many-towered Camelot;  
And up and down the people go,  
Gazing where the lilies blow  
Round an island there below,  
    The island of Shalott.*

*Alfred Tennyson (1842)*

## **Chapter 1**

Shauna suspected from the outset, something about the slant in her daughter's voice when Eliza first mentioned Stanley's name, that he is in trouble if not trouble itself, which is likely the most appealing quality for her daughter. He is a manager at the café where Eliza works part-time and how much trouble he is in Shauna now learns while on the phone with her eldest son, William.

- No, it's not up for sale, William. It's already sold . . . Right . . . True . . . Well, not exactly right out from under you, dear . . . I told you . . . Otherwise there are extra carrying costs, and I'm taking this time . . .

Shauna had posted the listing for the house some months ago, has even accepted an offer. Already on the edge of West Hollywood, they were thinking about moving to Venice Beach. Shauna and Eliza wanted to move further west, pushing their way toward the sea, a move with a biblical ring. In August the heat mercifully abates each evening, but the air has not been scrubbed by rain in five months whereas Venice at least has the marine layer in the morning dampening the sand. Here the air hangs above the house and dusts the leaves in the garden, a dark greasy powder on the furniture inside and out. They considered leaving L.A. altogether, moving back east, but at least Venice is closer to the airport and the ocean. Schools

might have been an issue but Eliza's on her third high school that she hardly attends.

- Yes, I'm sorry you feel that way, but you have a place of your own . . . No, damnit, I'm not trying to ruin your life. I'm not doing this to you; I'm doing this for me . . . Yes, for me and Eliza. William, she's eight years younger than you. She thinks a garden is important to me . . . No. You moved and that was your decision . . . No. I'm not punishing you for moving out on your own . . . Good. Good decision. I applaud your decision. Look, honey, there's someone on the other line. Could you hold for just a second?

Shauna clicks over to the other line.

- Hello? Oh, yes. Mother, I'm so glad you called. Yes, I got your note. Could you just hold on one second? William is on the other line.

Clicks over. Eliza rushes in through the front door, presses her weight up against the back of it to hold it shut but the door is blocked from the other side and she is far too slight to secure it.

- Eliza, what is this?
- Mom, help!

William is still waiting.

- William, it's your grandmother, long distance . . . Yes, I know yours is long distance, but her call is a longer distance, and the three hour time . . . Oh, for God's sake, you're on your cell . . . I'll call you back. Okay. When you get home tonight . . . Yes, of course, your home. You don't live here anymore. What are you doing in Orange County anyway? Hold on a minute. Eliza, what the hell?

Shauna sees the shadow of a boy through the frosted cut glass window, the toe of a running shoe wedged in the door as Eliza on the other side

strains to slam it shut. Shauna still holds the phone in her hand, crosses the room, and throws her weight on Eliza's side of the door just as the toe withdraws. The door closes. Eliza turns the bolt, rushes to secure the back door while the boy slams his fist against the door frame. Shauna turns her attention back to her son on the line.

- Okay. Yes. When you get back downtown, tonight . . . No, I'm not selling anything else until you get here. Look, I've got to go. Something . . . You could have spent the whole summer here if you wanted. Yes. Sublet your place and move back home. No, I'm not serious. Look, I've got to go. Talk to you later.

The boy pounds on the back door, harder and harder.

- Eliza, what on earth?
- Mom, it's Stanley. You know.
- If that is Stanley why don't you let him in?
- Mom, don't let him in.
- Of course, I won't. But . . .

Eliza is what? Afraid or angry? Ginnie, Shauna's mother, is also still on the line and might hear the alarm in Eliza's voice which will alarm her as well, compounding Shauna's problems, her mother and whatever problem is banging on the door. Shauna speaks into the receiver.

- Mom, can I call you back this evening? Yes. I know it is evening for you. Can I call you later this evening? Will you still be up at nine? Nine your time.

The color in Eliza's voice changes from fear to heartbreak and now she pleads.

- Mother?

The pounding gets louder. The boy, Stanley, his voice muffled from outside, is also pleading,

- Eliza! The cops, Eliza. They're looking for me. Please let me in!
- Of course the police are after you!
- Eliza, what is going on?

Shauna demands an answer. The pounding stops momentarily. Stanley perhaps supposes Shauna will intervene on his behalf. Eliza holds her breath. No one makes a sound. Eliza is the first to blink.

- Mother, it's Stanley. Stanley!

The implication here is not simply that Shauna knows the boy but also that she knows something *about* the boy, something that explains Eliza's predicament. When his name was dropped into previous conversations Eliza described him in no detail, though affectionately, tenderly, not in this tone. Now she hisses the initial 's' and speaks in almost a whisper.

- He robbed me, Mom. No kidding. He robbed the café on my shift, when he knew I'd be on cash. He knew because he assigned me that shift. Don't let him in, Mom. Please don't let him in!
- Of course I won't.
- He trained me never to let anyone behind the counter on my shift. And he came in on my shift and I let him back! He was even carrying a gun! At first I thought he was kidding!

The muffled voice calls again,

- Let me in. They're coming, damn it. I'm through with Juvie, Liz. You know I won't go back. Let me in.
- Stanley, I'm not letting you in!

Eliza's eyes grow big as dinner plates as they meet her mother's. Shauna whispers to her while she dials 9-1-1.

- Eliza, where is this gun? I'm calling . . .

Eliza pulls the phone from her mom, shakes her head and mouths his name again, her mouth twisted between fear and fury—Stanley.

- Liz, let me in!
- Are you crazy, Stanley? Go away!

It shakes Shauna up, the implication that indeed this boy whose proper name pulls her daughters' face in anguish and makes her bare her teeth as she says his name in that silent scream, a name that tugs at her heart, this boy on the other side of their door might hold a gun. And the police are looking for him.

Now the pounding stops. After several minutes Shauna and Eliza look at each other. Both suppose he has left. They both move deeper into the house, huddle in the kitchen, drinking tea. They share a pot of camomile tea. That's supposed to calm the nerves, Eliza says. It might help, she says. She's texting like crazy but she never cries.

That evening the police come by looking for Eliza, asking her to identify Stanley from a photo. She refuses to cooperate, even as she pretends to cooperate. She tells them they must be mistaken, that she had never seen the robber before and she is quite certain she will never see him again. The prospective buyers with their house inspector arrive at about the same time as the police and, since their offer was conditional upon the inspection, they size up Shauna's predicament and, much to their broker's chagrin, back out of the deal graciously. Yes, there is in fact a plumbing problem, Shauna magnifies. Roots from the neighbors' eucalyptus trees clog the drains. Running a snake helps but never solves the problem. Yes, there might be something else. Did I mention the problem with the garage door?

Sometime during that night Stanley is arrested for robbing the café. Everyone except Eliza told the police they saw him do it, but Eliza's word is definitive: It's not him.

Shauna is a real estate agent. When she thinks of changing her life, of taking some leave, it is not of her senses but of her current address. Her

long body suddenly seems too big for her shrinking spirit, just as for the last year her house has seemed too big for her shrinking family. She wants to sell the house they have lived in since the kids were little because she is afraid of ghosts, her husband's ghost, but what she says is that she wants a smaller place. Eliza doesn't say what she wants. Eliza thinks, or at least she said she thought that Shauna should do whatever she wants, if only she could decide what that is. If Shauna wants a garden why don't they move into one of the bungalows along the Venice canals?

- Those cost a fortune, over a million.
- Those little houses?
- Yes.

Shauna knows. It's her business to know more about this than her daughter knows. She knows her business. Well, then buy a smaller house with a garden, or even just move into a guesthouse with a garden, Eliza suggests, and she will find her own apartment. But this is Los Angeles, Shauna points out, which means if she doesn't stay in the housing market she might not be able to afford to buy back into it. Eliza says,

- It's all heading south again . . . what do you real estate people say? Making a correction.

She plunks herself down on the sofa and shrugs.

- Please yourself, Mom.

And she plugs her ears back into her iPod.

Shauna has also taken leave from the office, a leave of absence which seems like a double negative to her; a leave of being absent suggests she should be there but Fred, her broker, insisted she needs still more time.

- Your daughter has to be your priority.

Fred is an expert on the subject of parenting, a thirty-eight year old single man who claims to be childless but when pressed acknowledges that

he can't actually account for every single sperm, so there might be some offspring somewhere.

Last winter Shauna indeed needed time off, said she needed to be on set with her daughter, then claimed she needed to spend more time with her frail mother back east which was a lie. The truth is that she was looking at a major career change. She had studied history in college before studying real estate, and now was working on a history project with her daughter who was being home schooled because she was supposed to be on a series for part of the year, which should have been her final year of high school, but the series was cancelled and she wasn't schooled much at all. Of the past four generations on Shauna's side of the family, each of whom at the very least held masters degrees, no one had ever managed to make it through four years of high school.

So far this summer there hasn't been any change. Shauna hasn't begun working on her project with the Historical Society, couldn't see what new career she might pursue, and her daughter makes light about being a high school dropout.

Theo, her middle child, lives semi-permanently in England now while William, predictably, does nothing surprising. He took his own apartment downtown one year after finishing an MBA at USC, establishing himself in an investment brokerage firm and in an airtight loft conveniently located just a block from his office. Convenience is important to William. Eliza is completely different, as reticent as Theo is indifferent and as William is insistent, as unconcerned about convenience and convention as Theo is oblivious and as William is concerned about everything. William became particularly concerned about Eliza once she left high school last year. Eliza has to pursue her career. He bellowed.

- What is that? Acting?

Once Eliza's series was cancelled Eliza's new manager, Brandi, moved from Los Angeles to New York. Brandi promised to set Eliza up with auditions in New York for stage and screen if Eliza would relocate there, which made no sense at all, certainly not before pilot season. Still, Eliza was tempted. New York's theatre scene intrigues her, live performance is more challenging than screen acting, and she tried to persuade Shauna who admitted she has no idea what difference it would make where they spent this year, east coast or west. Shauna had grown up in upstate New York. She and Eliza had spent part of their summers there and in New



York City a few years back. If nothing there panned out, Eliza argued, she could go on to England for the summer to visit her brother, Theo. There she could study some obscure English literature that fascinates her. Oxford University has a summer program for high school students, and Liza Bear, as Theo affectionately nicknamed her (whereas her friends shorten her name), would be a real high school student. She might finish, so for her at least going to England would be a return of sorts, returning to school. Shauna could go visit her mother in upstate New York and then go visit her old friend Muriel in Buffalo. Or whatever.

But they didn't go to New York, and Eliza decided not to go to England either. She told her mother,

- I can do that studying just as well here and it's time Theo visits us.

And that same week Eliza booked a five week shoot for an indie, *No Angel*, this September so just as it seemed as if everything was about to change, nothing changed. Yet the sense that some leave-taking is necessary, that it is time, remains though in deference to William Shauna has taken the house off the market altogether. She hardly gives the move or Stanley another thought for the rest of the summer. Even Eliza seems quite unconcerned about the Stanley incident although she loses her job at the café because of the break-in. That doesn't matter. She doesn't need the job. She only had a few days' work during pilot season last winter but saved some money. Waitressing was a sideline, a skill she felt every actress needs.

So they don't move out of the house though they do, of course, move around the house, room to room and Shauna in particular moves from inside the house to the garden and back, as is her wont in the hot August weather, since she does love her garden. Eliza spends most of her time indoors reading.

William settles down because apparently nothing is going to change. But things do change in time, just not in real time.

*Willows whiten, aspens quiver,  
Little breezes dusk and shiver  
Through the wave that runs for ever  
By the island in the river  
    Flowing down to Camelot.  
Four grey walls, and four grey towers,  
Overlook a space of flowers,  
And the silent isle imbowers  
    The Lady of Shalott.*

## Chapter 2

By the second week the young actors move like a dog pack when they're not working on the shoot for *No Angel*. They're all under drinking age but that poses no problem so long as they stay in the hotel at night, watching videos, three boys to every girl, now down to just Eliza and Rosie and the nine lost boys with thin unshaven facial hair, the four Latinos looking better than the blondes, and Jonathan, the Navajo, turning even Eliza's head. Mom, he's gay, she tried to throw Shauna off, but Shauna wasn't thrown.

- We're going to be down at the pool. Then probably in Jonathan's room watching porn.
- Eliza, stop.
- Mom, you started it.
- What did I say? Oh, never mind. Do you want to run your lines first?
- My line? I only have one line tomorrow, Mother. Then I die. I think I can handle it.
- I was just offering.

- I can handle it.
- I know you can, dear.
- I hate it when you call me that.
- Don't be out too late. You've got an early call. Did you check the call-sheet?
- Yes. 7:15. I can handle my life, Mother.
- I know you can, dear.
- I hate it when you call me that.
- I know. If you smoke pot your eyes won't be clear in the morning.

Shauna uses her daughter's vanity to keep her on the straight and narrow.

- Mom, where'd I put my swim suit?

Shauna walks out onto the patio. She can see the pool from here. Paul and Tom are already doing laps and the desert night is blowing cooler air into the courtyard. Thank God they put this shoot off until now. It would have been a furnace here in July, even at night. Eliza lives for this, to be on set, to hang with the other kids with their per diem and room service and there's always some guy who's been emancipated; they can hang in his room and watch movies like this was a college dorm, like they were in school which none of them are and none of them are likely to ever be, because this is their life. They live for this, for these weeks, four weeks if it's low budget but usually two months, maybe three.

- Good night, Mother.
- Good night, Liza Bear.

*By the margin, willow veil'd,  
Slide the heavy barges trail'd  
By slow horses; and unhail'd  
The shallop flitteth silken-sail'd  
Skimming down to Camelot:  
But who hath seen her wave her hand?  
Or at the casement seen her stand?  
Or is she known in all the land,  
The Lady of Shalott?*

### Chapter 3

- Katie, you did a beautiful job. That blush, with the line of concealer down her nose . . .
- You mean she made my face seem less fat. Just say it, Mom.
- I won't say that because it's not what I meant.
- Okay, so why don't you let Katie do her job today without any underhanded comments about your daughter being fat?
- I brought water and orange juice.

Katie, Eliza's makeup artist, tries to lighten things up as they approach the trailer.

- You're not fat. The doctor says you're in fact underweight. Stepping!

Shauna calls out the warning as she climbs up the last of the metal steps that might rock the make-up trailer, but no one is inside. Eliza rolls her eyes. Week three in the desert and the heat compounds Eliza's sense of oppression. In less than a year she can go on set without the mom and without the tutors. It's just a year, she reassures herself, but it is going to be

hard. The parts for girls seem plentiful enough, but producers prefer a girl over eighteen who doesn't require this entourage. This might be their last gig together, and now both Eliza and Shauna wonder why they didn't have Eliza emancipated two years ago.

Katie takes up her position by the mirrors and turns up the mix she's downloaded for Eliza. When the others arrive they'll have to switch to oldies, but Katie enjoys Eliza's music and they got here first. Today her make-up is complex, and Katie's a special effects artist, doing standard makeup and even prostheses for the boys' sword wounds. She used to be a puppeteer.

Shauna slides down to the corner of the counter and takes up her station in the empty chair, out of the way. She pulls her book out of her bag, sets it down in her lap and picks up a copy of *Vanity Fair* while the experimental hip-hop of *cLOUDEAD* fills the trailer.

- Katie, Mom's a feminist. I could be a porker and . . .
- Eliza Bear, you're thin as a rail.
- She's ideologically committed to lying about my weight.
- I'm just saying, Kate, you did a fantastic job
- Making my cheeks look exceptionally hollow. Even for a dead fat girl. I'm dead already in this scene.
- Katie, tell her she's not fat.
- Mom, Katie could get fired for telling a starlet she can't lose a few. That's heresy in these parts.

Just as the second A.D. peeks in from the foot of the trailer to check if anyone wants breakfast, Eliza swivels around, knocking Katie's hand so the powder flies everywhere.

- I'll have a ham and cheese omelette and croissant and just one scoop of sour cream on the side, and a Coke please.
- Liza?

- Mom will have the same.
- *Eliza* . . . Coke for breakfast?
- Mom, it's just eleven more months before I have to live with the health ramifications of my adult decisions, can't I start with a Coke?

Eliza turns back to the A.D. and winks.

- Not to worry, I'll throw it all up before the cameras roll.

Katie steps between mother and daughter, waving her powder brush like a magic wand.

- We'll make you a beautiful corpse.
- If you can do that today, then they don't pay you enough. I looked like hell when I woke up.
- Her eyes swelled from crying.

Katie, looking down, pretends to rummage through her eye shadows and then asks.

- Oh dear, did they catch Stanley?
- Hell no, it's not that. They blew too much poison in my eyes yesterday to make me cry in the heartbreak scenes, remember?
- Menthol.

Katie has assured Shauna again and again that it wasn't poison.

- But my eyes, whatever it is, I should sue you, Katie, and then Mom and I can both retire.

Katie doesn't bite the bait but rather retaliates.

- So how is Stanley?
- I'm sick of talking about it. Sick of thinking about it. You're a magician, Katie. I look better already. Thank you.

Danny comes up the steps and lightens the mood, just because he does.

- Hi, girls. How's everyone?

Katie chirps.

- Fine!

Shauna moves down the bar to get past Danny's station. She has promised to stay out of the way. That's the trick to this ridiculous job, to be there and not be there at the same time. She pretends to read, allowing Katie, Danny and Eliza their privacy to discuss the challenges of the day's shot list, the parties last night, even the problems they suffer with stage mothers if they want, with Shauna in particular, and even to discuss Stanley but that all will be in whispers even once the music is turned up. Between the actor and her makeup artist a conspiracy is waged against both the director, and the other stage mom who have nothing else in common but Eliza and Katie's disdain, and with Stanley. Evidently Eliza talks to Katie about Stanley; that's all Shauna catches from their hushed snippets of conversation. Evidently there's something to talk about.

The tension this morning between Shauna and Eliza is a hangover, only it was talk and not alcohol that flooded their brains last night and left this chemical residue. Eliza, Danny and Katie have now taken over the topic of the previous night: Eliza's audition for the part in the movie that transforms Tennyson's poem, *The Lady of Shallot*, into a teen slasher flick.

- Should I bleach my hair blonde for the audition? With hair extensions?
- Don't think of touching a hair on that head before we wrap, missy.

Danny injects his professional interests to turn the conspiratorial tone back to banter.

- Do you have a blonde wig I can use then? I have to upload the audition.

Shauna flips through the pages of *Vanity Fair* listening to her daughter imagine ways to change herself for this role. Eliza's heart is set on playing the lady despite the movie's ludicrous storyline, but it is low budget so surely they will opt for an older actor who doesn't require a stage mom and the school house trailer.

Shauna read the script; it confuses and frightens her. Whereas Tennyson tells us nothing about the curse except its conditions, the screenwriter implicates Sir Lancelot's friend, and through guilt by association Lancelot himself, in the curse that is in fact just a ruse, an idle threat that if the lady looks directly out into the world, down toward Camelot, she's a goner, dead meat. In the Hollywood version the lady receives a message penned by a witch describing these dire consequences should the lady venture forth into the world. But it is Lancelot's fellow knight imitating the crone's crooked handwriting, so the Lady remains a prisoner of false fear, a compliant prisoner as in the original poem, sitting there weaving and singing, above it all. The screenplay is hugely problematic, very little action, just a bit of a scuffle here and there between the boys and not much else. Shauna commented that it is called a *motion* picture for a reason, to which Eliza replied: it's a psychological thriller, not an action flick, Mother.

Shauna knows better than to bite that bait. Whenever she hears her formal title 'Mother' it is time to close off further conversation, but her daughter has been pressing the point regularly, that the role could shine with the feminine brilliance of Cocteau's *La Voix Humane*. Eliza shows Danny and Katie her copy of Cocteau's play, and Danny raises his dark eyebrow.

- Holy shit girl, you read in French now?
- I might as well use it for something. Mom made me study it.

Shauna looks up from her magazine. Katie catches Shauna's eye and chimes in.

- I'm glad it's working out for you.
- I should have studied Spanish. We live in California, for God's sake. If I spoke Spanish I would have been able to talk with Stanley's parents, and to Stanley in his mother tongue. But no, you made me study French so I could attend that ridiculous lycee.
- It is the best school on the west side.
- Says who?
- *Said* your father.

Too late to end on a happier note, Shauna picks up her book and exits the trailer. As she touches down on the desert floor Shauna rages at the injustice. She never applied for this job. She was drafted by the movie industry when Eliza's father, who was always better at stage parenting and actually enjoyed it, lay down and died.

Her anger is spent soon after she's out of the confines of the trailer into the dry desert air. She walks away from the village of doublewides, towards what seems to be the perimeter where production assistants have stopped rushing around. Shauna thinks of all the busy set people as figurines in a game called *Straight to DVD*. When she reaches what she supposes is the edge of the location, she finds several heavy props and large soft squares of Astroturf splattered with tiny bits of dried movie blood, a recipe of food coloring and soy sauce, from the previous scene. This provided the props for her nightmare last night; when she finally dreamed she herself was the tormented Lady, Sir Lancelot wooing her, and there was this blood. In her dream she is not going to make her way into a ripe old age, but looks directly out into the world and she is cursed. Shauna looks over the green turf, and then down at her pale arm already pink from the white desert sun. She has to remain on set all day, and it's a long day according to the call sheet, so she must make the best of it. She'll find a bagel and cream cheese from the craft cart. As her Chinese slippers slap against the sand her mind travels back to Tennyson's story, wondering again why the story of the lady intrigues Eliza so much, a child actor here in the twenty-first century, a girl with a boyfriend on the lam, a fair child of a modern woman, and even if Eliza were to get the part it will do little for her career. A low-budget

indie, poorly written, Katie teased Eliza that the final lines are another career-killer, just like the one they are shooting here. But if she gets the part of the lady these will be her lines, her career. Katie hardly ever speaks her opinion even if she has one, but Eliza asked, begged her to read the script and this was Katie's verdict. There's nothing else on Eliza's plate after they finish this shoot, and the winter sprawls out as dusty and barren as this dry Arizona desert landscape.

She and Eliza have already spent three weeks on location here. Shauna has a car at her disposal but while Eliza's on set she also is chained to the set by law. She passes the craft service cart and rummages through the bowl of wrapped chocolates. Rather than candy or a bagel for breakfast, though, she chooses a bosc pear instead from beneath the oranges, apples, grapes and kiwi on the fruit plate. She pulls bottled water from the bowl of ice and stares at her spot where she'll spend her day once they start shooting, a canvas chair behind the other chairs behind the director's monitor, almost out of sight, out of the way in this hot desert where even the cacti seem to have been shaved off to make room for subdivisions that sprawl out right over that rise beyond the set. She could drive into Phoenix tonight, but then where will she be but Phoenix? The name itself is a joke, a god that rises out of the ashes, like hell. Nothing rises here but the temperature. Ah, yes, the sun rises and the good citizens slouch forward towards Taco Bell and breakfast burritos for another day of being here and for the opportunity to vote Republican. Shauna sighs. She wonders if Mac is up, but she's got to stay here. This is her daughter's big day, her death scene. It's being shot out of sequence. Once Eliza dies she still has two earlier scenes to shoot and then it's a wrap.

Shauna looks over the set from the top stair before heading back into the trailer, looks over the team of gaffers, the DP and the DP's assistant, the camera man who's a woman and the script girl who's a boy and the line producer over by the battalion of trailers who is commanding this well ordered army of desert ants scurrying about purposefully, falling in line. Nothing seems to belong in this landscape. Mac follows close behind her, nods a cheerful 'good morning' as he walks into the make-up and hair trailer looking for his son.

- 'Morning, you all. Seen my boy?
- Not yet, but when you find him tell him he's up next.

Katie says that like she's offering an invitation, and Mac nods, moves along to find his son. Mac took on the stage parent job just as Eliza's father had. Both had real jobs so they hired guardians when their schedules conflicted with their children's. Yet they had the flexibility in their work to spend time on their children's careers, and no one ridiculed them for their interest. When Mac took early retirement to write his books, he and Ted could hang together near craft service wolfing down danishes and working on their laptops. In the evenings they'd seek out a water park for their child actors and golf courses for themselves. Or Ted and Shauna would watch movies and order junk food from room service. It was a series of extended vacations. It still is for the kids, the hotel transformed into a dorm for those below drinking age who nonetheless find beer and marijuana almost nightly, so that the stage mothers who tend to gather by the pool interrupt their bragging about their own offspring's achievements to cluck at someone else's child.

- Someone looks a little tired this morning.

One mother with bad hair frizzed by the heat hissed beneath her breath this very morning.

- That is so unprofessional!

Shauna keeps her distance from that gaggle, hangs more often with Mac although he is married as Eliza reminded her mother. That particularly ugly mother-daughter exchange still rings in Shauna's ears.

- I thought you said you were a lesbian, so how come you're flirting with a married man?
- I'm not flirting. And *you* said I was a lesbian.
- You are so flirting.
- With who?
- With *whom*.
- Eliza!

- I'm just asking you to not mac Mac. He's married. And even if it doesn't matter to him, it matters to his overly sensitive daughter. Jennifer worked that into the conversation, the bitch.
- I have no intention of getting involved with anyone on set.
- I wish you would, Mom. Just not him. Take Anthony for a test drive. He's cute.
- Eliza!
- Mom, get over it. Just because I can't sleep with the producer doesn't mean you can't. It might be good for my career, if you're any good at it.
- Eliza!
- Oh gag me, Mom. I can't even think of you having sex. Never mind, OK? I'm kidding. But not about Mac. I'm serious here; don't mac Mac.

One more year and Shauna will be done. Years ago, Shauna merely provided transportation to this class and that audition when her husband was too busy. The professionals expect more, and once Eliza's father died, especially since Eliza's manager moved back east, Shauna is regularly pressed into service. New head shots must be ordered, bios and resumes updated, reels re-cut, the end-year paper work of corporate accounts, commissions paid, residuals tracked, weeks on location, tutors hired when shoots are finished or cancelled and schools are reluctant to readmit child actors three quarters of the way through the school year, just to have them leave on another job a month later. Her daughter's success began eating whole chunks out of Shauna's days, then weeks, now months. Shauna feels she's in over her head, but it's almost over. Eliza will be emancipated upon her eighteenth birthday, next July.

They get Eliza's death shot in just two takes, and she's done for the day. In the early afternoon their driver drops Eliza off at the hotel and Shauna drives out into the desert. The wildlife, even the lizards, hide from the high sun by day and now a western skink, with its pointed nose and legs so tight

against its body it looks more snake than lizard, tentatively looks out from behind its rock. A few scrub jays perch by a picnic table where Shauna sits to finally eat her pear. She throws them the core and moves across the sand to sit under a heap of rocks that form a cave.

In the desert humans seem insignificant just as everything else takes on great significance. The heat is significant, particularly by late afternoon. The light changing on the rocks, a coyote makes its way toward a garbage bin. Water and the chill that comes with night, these are significant things, things to consider, to prepare for and to deal with. Survival is not to be taken for granted in the desert. Shauna claps her hand to frighten the coyote and moves back toward the car. A lone driver in a desert park, she leans against the PT Cruiser the production rented for her, insignificant compared to the magnitude of the sky and the intensity of the heat, even compared to the small scorpion hiding in a hole it dug in the sand inches from Shauna's slippered foot.

As the long blue shadows grow, Shauna crawls up onto the rocks that still radiate heat, and the desert appears like a moonscape, barren as the sun falls behind the earth. There she remains until dark. Had she brought a tent she might have been tempted to abandon her parental duties and spend the night outdoors, to be here and watch the sun rise again across the desert. As it is she falls asleep out in the open, and startles awake, wondering how long had she slept. It could be just seconds or hours; she left her phone in Eliza's cosmetic bag back in the trailer. There's a clock in the car and she pulls out the keys, alarmed and cold, her limbs tingling from the pressure of the hard bare rock. She must get back to find Eliza who no doubt has finished learning her lines for her scenes tomorrow, at the hotel alone, considering taking her own break, considering making some changes although in the end nothing changes, not yet. Everything is held suspended and still as the stars and the temperature drops beneath the moonless sky.

*Only reapers, reaping early,  
In among the bearded barley  
Hear a song that echoes cheerly  
From the river winding clearly;  
Down to tower'd Camelot;  
And by the moon the reaper weary,  
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,  
Listening, whispers, "Tis the fairy  
The Lady of Shalott."*

## Chapter 4

Two days later, the director announces it.

- Picture wrap!

Lots of applause; tradition. Shauna passes Eliza a robe to throw over herself, the thin cotton dress soaked and outlining her taut frame, and Eliza rolls her eyes as she turns to Katie.

- He's referring to my career.

Shauna protests.

- You were fine, honey.

Eliza again rolls her eyes and Katie indulges in candor.

- It wasn't your fault. Poison the writer's coffee.
- I won't get that opportunity. She's already left.
- Smart move. All the kids want to kill her.
- Not Jonathan. He was hoping to fuck her.

- Jonathan has a girlfriend.
- 'On location doesn't count.'

Shauna had been one of the only people on set who had actually spoken to the writer, Ariel.

- Ariel is a man, actually.

Katie turns to Eliza and shrugs.

- 'On location isn't gay.'

Shauna backs away, now merely eavesdropping on Katie and Eliza's banter. There was a time she and Eliza enjoyed this sort of casual repartee at the expense of the rest of the cast and crew, but presently it's the terrain of makeup artist and late adolescent actor, both thoroughly conversant in production and scandal. Shauna slides into her chair behind the monitor, now of course a blank screen, wondering if there's anything she's going to miss.

The wrap party is underway when Shauna and Eliza get back to the hotel, the adults on their second round of drinks and the kids in the pool with bloodshot eyes from pot and chlorine. Eliza goes to dump her bag in her room and to grab her suit while Shauna wanders over to the bar that opens up to a patio by the pool. She must pace herself, asks for a diet Coke. It will be hours before she can gracefully slip away to her room. Condensation quickly forms on the outside of her glass, cooling her hand as she backs away from Mac and that stage mother speaking in a stage whisper,

- Can you believe her mother let her name her corporation "Wild Bitch"? That's going to follow her all her career.

Shauna retreats with her glass that she can refill as often as she likes in the privacy of her room.

It's cooler now and she can turn the air conditioner off, open the windows and hear the kids' voices, their cannon ball jumps into the pool,

a capacity for pleasure that completely drowns out the adults. She hears Eliza squeal, and she takes some nuts from the mini-bar. Lying back on the bed, she smiles to think of Eliza and her friends who live for these weeks on location, but she knows for herself that, no, she won't miss any of this.



*There she weaves by night and day  
 A magic web with colours gay.  
 She has heard a whisper say,  
 A curse is on her if she stay  
     To look down to Camelot.  
 She knows not what the curse may be,  
 And so she weaveth steadily,  
 And little other care hath she,  
     The Lady of Shalott.*

## Chapter 5

In real time it starts as a request for a picture to be purchased, a print. Eliza holds in her hand a small postcard, a reproduction of the painting. She is standing near the picture window in the living room, her back to the glass such that the yellow afternoon sun provides backlight, a halo that forms in the looser, shorter strands of her long brown hair. She doesn't turn her face up to meet her mother's eyes when she asks,

- Where can I buy this?

She holds the postcard in her hand as she turns away so that she is in profile now. She assumes Shauna will know where they can buy the print, but Shauna hardly glimpses the image in her daughter's hand, looking at it upside down like that.

- Well, can I see it?

- Sure.

Eliza doesn't actually pass the postcard to her mother, not right away, and her speech is tentative. She speaks this way often lately, her voice more tight than modulated, as if she is dredging up each word from the bottom of a murky river. There is nothing wet in Eliza's voice that would suggest a river or even a nearly dry irrigation ditch. Her voice is so soft that her

mother must strain to hear. It is as if the girl is lifting cobblestones from a dry river bed, each word taking all the energy that is left, very little, but she has a job to do with those stone words, a path to lay out.

Still holding the postcard she moves away from the window, throws herself down onto the sofa across from Shauna, peering into its glossy chemical surface. Her head is bent forward so that her hair covers her face and further veils her voice. Shauna can't see the expression on her daughter's face but she doesn't need to see it. She knows the pinched look, knows her daughter is biting the inside of her cheek and that her eyes are slashes of dark because she is intent on something she doesn't think Shauna will like, something her mother won't understand. It is odd how Eliza can do this and how Shauna will fall for it repeatedly as she does now: how Eliza can ask her something so that Shauna assumes she is attempting to draw her in, and then the girl recoils in the next moment and Shauna is there next to her but suddenly alone, as if they are not together in the same room at all. Finally Eliza looks up and actually hands her mother the card.

- Mom, you probably won't like it. It isn't your style. It's romantic.

Those are her exact words as she reluctantly sets the card face up on the coffee table and slides it in Shauna's direction, not with her hand but with her stockinged foot. Shauna takes the card, a pre-Raphaelite painting depicting a young girl with long brown hair, sitting in a boat, looking bereft as all girls can at that age, looking out onto the water, surrounded by water, in her boat lined with rugs. How odd the rugs appear, draped onto the sides of such a small boat. What are the rugs for? Shauna is reminded of a photo in a biography of Sigmund Freud, a photo of his famous sofa bed where he first practised psychoanalysis, but the young woman in the painting is not a patient and she is reclining in a boat, not on a sofa.

Looking for a clue, Shauna turns to the back of the card: *The Lady of Shalott*, 1883. John William Waterhouse (1849-1917). Tate Gallery. Other than that, the card is blank. This isn't a message from someone; there's no writing at all. The card wasn't sent to Eliza by a friend travelling through the British Isles. It might be a postcard enclosed in a letter from her brother. Shauna had given him a global cell phone so he could phone home regularly from England, but the first month they received a \$1000 cell phone bill for roaming charges, and with spotty reception anyway Theo insisted he prefers email and hand written letters. There's this terrific new invention, he teased Eliza; I'll send you one. It makes traces on a piece of paper and you can

write longhand with it. That had been her children's only brush with such primitive technology to Shauna's knowledge. Perhaps Eliza bought the card for herself, the image interesting her, and she is correct; her mother doesn't like it. Still, Shauna wants to have something positive to say about it, or for it to say something to her, so she keeps staring at it, turning it over, searching for a hint.

- It's a museum piece. I doubt it's for sale.

Eliza rolls her eyes and opens up her laptop.

- I mean the print, Mom.
- Of course. Sorry.
- Never mind. I'll order it online.

So Shauna quits. It's true, she doesn't like the romantic style, not in painting, not in life. She prefers minimalism, paint so abstract and light that one doesn't notice the strokes, as if it is breathed directly onto the canvas, from thought to presence, no intermediary steps, nothing schooled. Or she likes paint applied with strokes heavy and raw so that she notices the sharp edges, paint so thick that she thinks more of the paint than of the painter or the image painted, paint smeared on the canvas with a spatula by an artist with strong arms. Eliza knows her mother's preferences. They've toured the galleries at Bergamot Station together several times. Eliza prefers the experiments at Track 16 to some of the more formalist works in the galleries on the east side of the station. They often agree to disagree about what's hung at the Patricia Correia Gallery and simply enjoy lunch together outside at the café there.

Knowing she has disappointed her mother with her pleasure in the Waterhouse painting, Eliza offers her condolences:

- Mom, I also like that print of Botticelli's, *The Birth of Venus*, the one you said you liked. I really do need some colour in my room and these two prints will do the trick.
- Botticelli's *Venus*; it's quite famous. It won't be difficult to find a good reproduction.

Venus, triumphant, beautiful, like her daughter who is also part Italian and also beautiful and also strong. Eliza was a gymnast as a little girl. Shauna tells her,

- There is a remarkable resemblance between you and the Goddess.

Eliza flashes that furious look, worse than hell's fury, a woman scorned. It is totally beyond Shauna lately to say anything that does not cause her daughter some offence. Shauna asks,

- What did I say?
- You think I'm as fat as that?

Before Eliza would joke about being fat, mocking the actresses she works with and toying with her mother. Shauna treads carefully.

- Venus is a goddess, the standard of beauty. I think you're as beautiful. That's all I'm saying.
- That I'm fat, then. Okay.

Eliza jumps to her feet and turns her back to Shauna, stares out the picture window. Goddess bitch. Goddess brat. This is the way it has been since late summer, since she lost her job at the café, and especially since she wrapped that film in the desert. Shauna resigns. She tells her daughter.

- I give up.

But Eliza is not ready to give up. She turns her attention back to her card of the lady, and asks again, facing away from her mother still so that her voice is small and sounds distant,

- But, Mom, the other one? I want that one.

*And moving through a mirror clear  
That hangs before her all the year,  
Shadows of the world appear.  
There she sees the highway near  
    Winding down to Camelot;  
There the river eddy whirls,  
And there the surly village churls,  
And the red cloaks of market girls  
    Pass onward from Shalott.*

## Chapter 6

Until Eliza began studying for the part and then asked for the Waterhouse print, Shauna had forgotten Tennyson's poem that lay as if wrapped in some heavy Victorian brocade fabric deep in her specifically female memory of vague threatening things best forgotten. At present Eliza is studying the poem displayed on her computer screen and when Shauna asks her to print up a copy Eliza pulls herself up to her full five foot and a bit higher, her chin raised slightly as she recites the two opening stanzas:

On either side of the river lie  
Long fields of barley and of rye  
That clothe the world and meet the sky;  
And thro' the field and road runs by  
    To many-tower'd Camelot;  
And up and down the people go  
Gazing where the lilies blow  
Round an island there below,  
    The island of Shalott.

Shauna never gets used to this, hearing her daughter recite poems, long monologues, running lines in a script from memory, words tripping off her lips as easily as if this is mere conversation. It mystifies Shauna, who can hardly keep her home and cell phone numbers straight. It is not simply memory but Eliza's ability to make the character present in speaking

what the character might say, does say, might have said long ago, so that a century past, or even a millennium melts into the present moment and nothing of Eliza herself is lost in the performance. Eliza claims, when Shauna challenges her career choice,

- I feel most alive when I'm acting.

They easily find both prints. Shauna thought the hunt for art might be a bonding experience, an opportunity to move through galleries along Miracle Mile, to flip through bins full of prints until their tastes converge on pictures for Eliza's room more convivial to them both. She imagined them going to the museum shop at LACMA or venturing away from the self-contradictory pre-Raphaelite iconographic naturalism over to the Brewery where modernism meets California kitsch, maybe purchasing an original work from an artist there instead of the Waterhouse print.

Instead, Eliza goes online. Botticelli's Venus certainly poses no challenge and the same site offers two more Waterhouse narrative paintings featuring the Lady of Shalott. The anguished Lady, still in her tower, her arms raised above her head, gazes at the world's pale reflection in the mirror, the world she cannot view directly. The curse she curses. There's the 1888 painting that Eliza wanted in the first place, the lethargic lady sitting primly in her boat. The worst of the lot features the woman sprawled in the same small craft, found dead. Several figures look down at her, the boat serving as an open casket, the river a watery funeral pyre. All the prints are available in various sizes, framed or unframed. The larger prints, 32 x 24 inches, tempt Eliza though Shauna persuades her that the smaller print, matted and framed, will appear more authentic set against the fresh white paint called cottage white, vaguely yellow. Eliza orders all the prints but concedes Shauna's point and orders the smaller size.

The prints arrive five days later.

Eliza's bedroom still has the smell of fresh paint. Shauna enjoys the scent of her daughter's room, paint fumes slightly masked by Eliza's perfume. Shauna breathes it in. Fresh paint reminds her of house sales, of homeowners who care, of moving on herself.

Now, hammer in hand, Shauna climbs up the aluminium step ladder and Eliza holds the painting of Venus while she criticizes her mother's hammering, that Shauna hasn't got the nails at a severe enough angle to hold the print, and hasn't got the two nails lined up straight. But they are straight, Shauna protests, and steps off the stool to back away and check.

Her daughter, full grown yet barely five feet tall, stands beneath the print of the lady and looks up at the painted Venus across the room, then back at the lady looking straight ahead, with the long face and the chestnut brown hair that is so like Eliza's only darker. There are other differences. The lady's wan expression compares poorly to Eliza's vitality, their respective spirits, but who can know anything about the lady? What do we know except what Tennyson offers? She lived alone. She wove the web from the images she saw in the mirror, double art.

- Why did Theo begin calling me Liza Bear? Why not simply Eliza or Eliza Hawk?
- He thought you looked like his Teddy Bear. He started it.
- You mean he thought I was fat as a baby? Was I a fat baby?
- No. He thought you were loveable.
- Then why didn't he call me Eliza Jesus.
- That would be sacrilegious. He might have known I wouldn't allow it.
- Latinos are called Jesus all the time.
- What's this about?
- I'm just asking.

Shauna looks at Venus and hangs it on the nail, then looks over at the lady, and then at her daughter. Eliza is smiling like she did as a child, an expression of a child caught once by a photographer taking Eliza's headshot for her agency, so natural that it took Shauna's breath away. Eliza never looked at Shauna like that, not with that much delight. But she did look now toward the painting on the wall, smiling like that, a little tension of excitement in her shoulders drawn so slightly up around her neck, and Shauna dreading the thought, the realization actually, that the girl prefers the image of the lady to that of Venus. Shauna's back curls under the weight

of this observation. Yes, Eliza definitely prefers the lady. She sees something there and it resonates.

Okay, Eliza is neither a goddess nor a Lady, no longer a child but not a woman either, not in her mother's eyes. Yet there is something about the lady that Shauna recognizes in her daughter. Lady, even the word belongs to another era that might best be forgotten. Buried. English and aggressive. Eliza, unprompted by her mother, recites the next few verses:

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,  
 Little breezes dusk and shiver  
 Thro' the wave that runs for ever  
 By the island in the river  
     Flowing down to Camelot.  
 Four grey walls, and four grey towers,  
 Overlook a space of flowers,  
 And the silent isle imbowers  
     The Lady of Shalott.

She rounds the recitation off with a shrug, almost a giggle, and in an Italian accent that she feigns convincingly, she sighs,

- Ah, it is so beautiful. She dies.

Shauna grimaces, yet tries to enjoy Liza Bear's joke. Shauna asks,

- Are we done in here? Should I make us some tea?
- Mother, you must at least know the song. It was popular many years back, maybe when you were a girl. You know, an oldie.
- I'm not familiar with it.
- Celtic. I think that's why Theo likes it. In fact, Theo emailed me the mp3. You want to hear it?

Eliza runs ahead down into the living room without waiting for the answer, to retrieve her iPod as Shauna moves into the kitchen to put the kettle on. Eliza places it on the Bose docking system and now the ballad set to music wafts into the kitchen as Eliza herself does, singing to herself

as the lady herself sings, or as Loreena McKennitt sings about the lady singing. Eliza sings along for her mother and when the song ends, Eliza begins again from the beginning, unaccompanied. The kettle boils and Shauna lifts up a box of chai tea and another box of English breakfast tea, as if to ask her daughter which she prefers. Her daughter gestures her indifference, raising her hands, palms up, and continues singing as Shauna pours hot water over the teabags in two mugs. She heats the milk as the tea steeps. Eliza comes to the end of the song and starts again. Shauna adds hot milk and honey to the mugs.

- Darling, I'm soon going to have to ask you to stop singing.

Eliza stops singing only to smile slyly toward her mother and nod.

- We'll cross that bridge when we get there.

She begins the song again from the beginning. She does, however, stop singing once the tea is cooled. She stops singing to drink her tea in silence across the table from her mother.

*Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,  
An abbot on an ambling pad,  
Sometimes a curly shepherd lad,  
Or long-hair'd page in crimson clad  
Goes by to tower'd Camelot;  
And sometimes through the mirror blue  
The knights come riding two and two.  
She hath no loyal Knight and true,  
The Lady of Shalott.*

## Chapter 7

Eliza seldom has visitors now, not since she quit her job at the café and not since the acting work slowed down, stopped. Shauna sees her checking her cell for text messages, then looking off at a distance, apparently with no message. Shauna pries,

- So at least he won't get drafted now that he's a felon.
- There isn't a draft and he isn't a felon because he wasn't convicted. He's just on the lam. And he's also dirt poor and sure, he talked about joining the army. He thought it was the only way he could ever go to college. But he would have wound up in Afghanistan. So now if they do catch him he'll be in the slammer instead of a corpse on some foreign mountain but there's no GI bill when your released from jail so you know what that makes him? It makes him a fucking genius!
- We are still talking about the boy who held you up at gunpoint?
- Of course. He's a genius. It was simply theater, only I didn't get it. And I can see you don't get him either, even when I lay it all out for you.

- I hardly met him.
- He was shy of you because he's dirt poor. He figured you'd notice.
- Well, I didn't. Eliza, what's happened to Jessica and Caroline and Becky?

Eliza ignores her, changes the subject, asks about the recipe for oil-free vinaigrette and pulls down the ancient grease-stained *Joy of Cooking* that's remained unopened possibly for years. The fossilized cookie dough still marks the page that was William's favourite snack, and probably still is. Eliza wrinkles her nose.

- Oh, that's nasty. I'll just google it.

She dances into the living room, returning with her laptop that she opens up next to the sink and surfs the net. Shauna tries again.

- I thought we were talking about friendship, love.
- You were. I was talking socio-economics. At the present I'm looking for a recipe. Oh my God, Mother. Look at this site. GodeCookery.com. All these medieval recipes. Shit, and a glossary of terms and ingredients. Oh, sorry. You wanted to talk about love and friendship. What do you want to know? Why don't we talk about your friends? That would be a short conversation.
- I have friends.
- Friend. Singular. Alice.

They could talk about Alice but really, why would they? So in fact the conversation ends there.

Did her daughter lose heart, was it broken or merely cracked a bit, Shauna wonders. Was it Stanley? Ah, certainly not that squid, as her daughter referred to him for a time. It was such a small love if there was any love there at all. Liza Bear's pride was bruised, that's all. That's what

Shauna would say, but she doesn't say anything now. It's a serious fault for a mother to speak of these things. She must look the other way and wonder only to herself, never aloud. Or was her daughter's heart broken in a secret romance, someone other than Stanley, someone she never mentioned at all? Shauna can only hope. She catches herself, both ashamed and hopeful. After all, Eliza had hardly mentioned Stanley until the police were about to arrive. Surely he wasn't a serious love interest. A petty thief more than rebel, he has a criminal record because he didn't calculate the risks correctly. For instance, he thought Eliza would let him in and she wouldn't. Doesn't that prove she was not in love with him? So there must be some other secret love, or perhaps it is her father's death that broke her heart. Stop that thought. Shauna demands this of herself. There was nothing that could be done, nothing that can be done. The thought stops.

- Mom, I've got an audition this afternoon. I need the car.
- Why didn't you say something before?
- Why would I?

Shauna sets the kettle onto the stove to make herself a cup of tea as Eliza takes her laptop back into the living room. Shauna hates to think of her late husband and usually doesn't except at such moments. He would have known about the audition. He would have helped Eliza prepare. He kept on top of all this. There is still a gaping hole in their lives, empty space. His death was sudden, not like Shauna's mother's dying that seems to have been dragging on all of Shauna's life. His was in an accident. It wasn't his fault. He hadn't been drinking or speeding, yet there he lay unconscious, unable to speak through the rest of that long February. Nearly four years ago, Shauna held his hand, brushed the back of his hand and it would register on the monitor. Something would register, a blip on a screen, that's all. Slowly Shauna got used to the idea. Finally the respirator was unplugged with William standing at the head of the bed, appointed the new man of the family because he at least was of drinking age, had just turned twenty-one, Theo, at seventeen edging out of his teenage years, Eliza entering into the thick of hers. Eliza looks at the computer screen, intent on the recipe she's reading, anticipating success. Any death would have been horrible, of course. He had been a good husband, a good father. But his death confirmed something for Shauna. Even a slow death

compares favourably to the slow death of love after a loved one is gone. If she were religious, and believed in an afterlife, she wonders, would it be easier? Could she get him to haunt Eliza, see to it that she ate properly? Coach her through this audition?

Eliza drifts away from the laptop back into the living room to pick up her knitting, as Shauna remembers sitting with her friend Alice and their girls on the steps of the LA Superior Court, in the shadow of the new cathedral and Walt Disney Concert Hall, huddled beneath the walls of curved steel. Their daughters, Eliza and Jessica, saw each other almost every day throughout their early teens, studying for their GED, a requirement for early admittance into community college. That was the plan the girls hatched. They would both take the GED, Eliza, because of the inflexibility of high school and her acting career, and Jessica because of the inflexibility of high school when, by the time she was fifteen, she was pregnant. Eliza had asked Shauna back then, shortly after Ted's death, if Shauna would oppose her in court if she sought emancipation.

- Strictly for professional reasons, Mom.

Shauna never had to answer that question. It was simply dropped.

The tea pot boils. Shauna calls into the living room where Eliza sits, her lap full of wool.

- Eliza, you want another cup of tea?
- No thanks.

Shauna stands in the doorway and sees her daughter, slumped on the couch, throwing her knitting to the side to stick her nose in a script.

- What's the role?
- Another teen drama. They trick me into the boy's car and then I die. The usual, except no vampires.
- You want me to run lines with you?
- No need.

- You talked to Jessica lately?
- No, why would I?
- Just wondering.

Jessica and Liza Bear were close girlhood friends but they've grown far apart. Eliza says Jessica is boring, only talks about boys, and look where that got her? Seventeen years old with a two year old in tow. Eliza looks up and asks Shauna,

- You talked to Alice lately?
- No, why would I?
- Just wondering.

Shauna sits down with the pages of Tennyson's poem that Eliza printed up for her. They're already curled, the corner stained. Her mind drifts back to the scene at the hospital. She does sometimes feel betrayed by her husband's death. Her husband left her with three children and grief so intense, sharp as blades. She loved him. She missed him, especially at first. So did Eliza and the boys, of course. They seldom talk about it. Once he actually died Shauna never cried.

When Eliza was still little she would crawl into her father's lap to sing songs with him. He made up lyrics and tunes, songs that were peopled with Liza Bear's friends and places, some nonsense places and some real places, Oz and Muscle Beach. After a trip to New York together they made up lyrics about the Central Park Zoo, about the polar bear on Prozac and the seals in the central pool. Whenever Ted pointed to her, Liza Bear filled in the word her father had omitted in the lyric, and if it made a rhyme they would laugh and laugh. If it didn't rhyme they would laugh all the more. Eliza never talks about their game, but sometimes she sang and played this game with her friends. Now she only sings Aretha Franklin and Celtic hymns. Theo and William don't talk about the past either. Live in the present, their mother the historian had taught her children. And they all seem to do just that, all except her.

Shauna watches her daughter sitting on the couch this early afternoon, watches Liza Bear knitting. The script for the audition lies open on the coffee table, the sides for her audition folded next to it.

- It's been a little while since you've had an audition. Looking forward to this one?
- I've been offered auditions. I just don't go.
- Do you have any plans for Halloween?
- No, why do you ask?
- Just wondering.
- Do you have any plans?
- No.
- Just wondering.

This seems to go on forever. It is one month before Shauna notices that Eliza has had no visitors, a month before she notices this unnatural calm about Eliza, unnatural for someone so young. Her husband used to liken Eliza to a smooth fine wine that would mellow with age. The edges and hard angles of Eliza's small body, he said, would soften just as now the orange light streaming in from the window lightens her brown hair to gold. Not so round yet. The girl has grown quite thin. Perhaps she has simply lost muscle tone since she quit her various workout classes, Shauna speculates. Her body is too lean but she still has some of the softness of a child. Life will sharpen her features, not only her tongue, Shauna had assured her husband, but he didn't live to see it.

*But in her web she still delights  
To weave the mirror's magic sights,  
For often through the silent nights  
A funeral, with plumes and lights  
And music, went to Camelot;  
Or when the Moon was overhead,  
Came two young lovers lately wed.  
"I am half sick of shadows," said  
The Lady of Shalott.*

## Chapter 8

Eliza blew off the audition and doesn't want to talk to Shauna about it except to report that she'd blown it off. Maybe she still has a chance at the lady, was all she said. That would be cool. Did Brandi phone? Eliza asked. No. Any word of a meeting with the director? Shauna asked. No.

Tennyson never suggests in his poem what or how the lady might eat. If she lives alone in the tower and never leaves the tower, how can she garden or hunt? She might survive by eating trapped mice, living like an arctic wolf on mice and air. Years ago Shauna and Eliza watched *Never Cry Wolf* together on DVD. Eliza was very little and once Shauna realized that the mice would become a staple in Tyler's diet, it was too late. Eliza wouldn't let her turn it off or fast forward through Tyler's meal of mouse sandwich. The small girl sat riveted to the set, and days later Shauna found Theo and Eliza replaying those scenes over again and again.

Maybe Tennyson's Lady also survives on mice. Of course she doesn't survive for long. Yet so long as she stayed in the tower surely the young woman must have eaten some fruit or vegetables, or craved them ferociously. Did she weave her craving into the tapestry, nearly able to taste yellow squash, bright chard and carrots as she shaped them in thread? Tennyson didn't know or simply didn't care to suggest how she survived day-to-day—poetic license—but Shauna is a mother, not a poet, and worries about it. She speculates. She conjures up the possibility that the lady pioneered hydroponics, that there is an underground well beneath the tower that bubbles up into a basin in the basement. Perhaps the lady knows



that water and sunlight make salad, and fashions a green house in the bay window, careful always to keep her eyes averted lest she die looking directly into the light. She may not even understand the specific consequences of the curse; she is obedient in general principle, knowing there are consequences. Perhaps she collects arugula seeds off the wings of sparrows that perch on her finger and she learns their songs. She takes the seeds and places them in cups of water until they germinate. Now, with feathers or with splinters from the oak flooring, she props each seedling up in the water to grow, the water infused with minerals she scrapes from the dirt floor in the basement of the tower. Thus she renegotiates the contours of her restricted world, or rather Shauna does, beginning simply with a spring-fed well and a mother's conviction that the lady must eat some salad.

Shauna considers this while she cooks Liza Bear some soup, a squash hotpot, and hopes her daughter will eat some. It will take another half hour to simmer but what does it matter? Shauna is not hungry and Liza Bear hasn't been hungry in months, or so it seems. Perhaps her daughter's appetite will grow with the rich aroma of the soup. The truth, Shauna thinks, is not simply that her daughter has lost her appetite—she refuses appetite. She confounds hunger by fasting, an act of will, this wilful daughter. She hasn't been eating much of anything at all, at least not so one would notice, and Shauna would have noticed.

Squash soup seems the perfect way to mark the onset of autumn even as the Santa Ana winds blow hot, in from the desert. While Shauna cooks, Eliza sits there at the kitchen table, the newspaper spread out in front of her, her knitting in her lap, and Shauna asks,

- Can I make you a plate of cheese melts while we wait for the soup?
- No. No, thank you.
- How about a bit of salad? There is spinach still from the garden.
- No, thank you.
- I bought some strawberries for dessert. They might be a bit watery. They are out of season but I can sugar them and whip some cream . . .

- I'm not hungry, Mother, really.

Eliza folds up the newspaper and gathers her knitting to take it into the living room.

Where did the story idea come from anyway, the idea to make Tennyson's poem into a movie?

The curse has already taken effect in Waterhouse's painting that now hangs quite straight on Eliza's wall. The lady is not yet dead but is staring at death. Having looked directly down to Camelot, she is prepared to die a hero for love. In the Hollywood version she slips on a river rock and drowns.

And where did the original story come from? Does a small incident catch in the mind, then resonate in the ear? Somehow it does get under the skin, is passed along, its passing being the very thing that makes it a story.

It used to be that Shauna knew what film projects Eliza was interested in, or those that her manager was interested in for her, but *The Lady of Shalott* seemed to have come out of nowhere, without so much as a phone call from her agent, and had neither gone forward nor been discarded by Eliza; it seems to have caught on something in her daughter's imagination. Shauna had pressed Eliza for details and Eliza explained that she shouldn't even have seen the script. It was passed to her by a friend but at present the project is in development hell, a term of art Shauna understands is roughly akin to a property in foreclosure, meaning no one has committed the full amount of money needed to actually move the deal forward but too much money is at stake for everyone to simply walk away. The friend must remain nameless because Eliza isn't supposed to have a copy.

- Mom, they were in talks with an A list star for the lady, they stretched the truth about how firm she was and that's how they got the money, but the offer was never accepted so if the whole thing doesn't collapse, I still might have a chance. The director saw a clip of *No Angel*, and liked me. I'm in the mix but I really shouldn't talk about it.
- This is the first I've heard you say anything about it in quite a while.
- Mother, I know. Please.

- Does Brandi know anything about this?
- Brandi doesn't know anything. She's the worst manager ever.

Shauna doesn't like the deception. She needs Brandi as much as Eliza does, this elusive manager providing Shauna at least some buffer between the stage mom role she's ill prepared for and the industry with its labyrinthine studios, unions, never mind the international and independent productions. Shauna hadn't pressured Eliza before about the ethics involved in even receiving the script because she thought the problem would simply disappear, the project set aside as so many projects get sidelined. It is still entirely likely, so perhaps she should simply change the subject, but she has found a book she received years ago from her book club, *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*, and hands it to her daughter, who snatches it up eagerly.

- Shit, this is great. Thanks, Mom.
- I also found . . . You might be interested . . .

Eliza barely scans the cover of the second volume Shauna found in the local library, an obscure score of music and poetry by John Cage. The other day Shauna told Eliza about going to hear John Cage's music in the sculpture garden at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. That was the summer vacation Liza Bear spent with her grandma in Oswego, the boys went away to camp in upstate New York, and Shauna vacationed alone in Manhattan for days. A magical season. At the concert a singer was positioned like a ballerina, and turned in circles inside a piano as if inside a music box, a jewellery box. Shauna had such a music box but Liza Bear never did, and she didn't know what Shauna was going on about when Shauna tried to explain back then, but Liza Bear was very young and to this day still doesn't know anything about John Cage. At the time, Shauna tried to explain, but there was no way. For Shauna his music signified displacement even of sound, so that the ambient sound of the city outside the garden was part of his composition even if he didn't compose that part of the piece, and after he was dead the empty chair near the stage signified his presence by his absence just as silence signals the presence of music in its absence. Everyone knew his music, everyone who heard it in the MOMA sculpture garden, in the long John Cage silences, and the background noise

of midtown Manhattan, on this, the most lovely night Shauna had ever spent alone. Shauna tried to explain now but Eliza can't imagine.

- So where was I?
- You were at your grandmother's. You were still little but you liked her very much back then so I felt okay about leaving you.
- I still like the crazy old bird.
- So for once I was left to explore the city alone at night and went to this recital alone. Afterwards I walked all the way back to my room at The Larchmont Hotel in the village where I poured myself a glass of wine. I sat by the window and the room had painted wicker furniture, white, a wicker chair by the window and a wicker table and I had take-out from the deli and a bottle of wine. I poured myself a glass of wine and sat in the window and listened to the people passing me on the street below. I was inexplicably happy. It must have been the music.
- So what does that have to do with Tennyson's poem, or my script?
- Nothing.

A big expectant pause follows and then nothing. Shauna assumes Eliza doesn't like thinking of her mother being happy without her, or perhaps she simply can't imagine her mother existing without her at all. Eliza has never existed without her mother so she doesn't have her absence as a frame of reference, the big difference between mothers and their children, Shauna recognizes. A mother has a before but generally no after-the-child, while the child has no before-the-mother but an after that gapes open into eternity, represented sometimes by cartoonists as a big black hole in the child's mouth when it screams. A mother's reminiscences are the correlatives of the child's anticipation, yet altogether separate, different experiences entirely.

Actually, Eliza doesn't care what her mother is thinking. It's none of her business so she plugs her ears into her iPod, flicks open her cell phone to see if there's a text message—nothing—flips it closed and picks up her

knitting needles. Now it's silk yarn mixed with hot wool running through her fingers. She places the yarn in a wooden bowl, a centrepiece in the hall resembling a fruit bowl that she now carries with her or sometimes the ball of yarn follows her down the hall like a train as she knits. There is time enough in November to make long wool and silk scarves, Christmas gifts for her absent friends. Maybe Theo will want one. Certainly he'll need one if he intends to stay in England. Judging from the tone of his emails, she is sure he intends to stay. The script for another project lies on the table unopened.

Shauna wanders across the kitchen and stirs the soup. The spinach wilted quickly so it's ready. Add a little ground pepper. She waves to get Eliza's attention and Eliza puts down her knitting, takes out one earpiece and cocks her head to hear her mother.

- Are you sure you don't want some of this soup for lunch? It's good. I just tried some.
- No, thank you.
- Well, I'm going to have some and I'll leave the rest in the pot on the stove. Help yourself later.
- Thank you, Mother.
- How about some tea and macadamia nut cookies, honey? Would you join me for dessert with tea?

But Shauna knows she's already been dismissed. Eliza, her iPod buds back in her ears, has died into her music and knitting. Shauna sips a cup of soup alone in the kitchen, then heads out into the garden alone to enjoy her macadamia nut cookies and tea.

When she comes back inside a half hour later she finds a plate in the sink with what seems to be melted cheese smeared on it and some crumbs, perhaps the remains of a cheese melt. That was once Liza Bear's favourite food. Shauna is also relieved to see orange peels in the garbage.

It is all fantasy, what the lady eats. The truth is, Shauna knows no more than Tennyson. For all Shauna knows, she eats nothing at all and then she dies. In any case, they made the whole story up.

*A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,  
He rode between the barley sheaves,  
The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves,  
And flamed upon the brazen greaves  
Of bold Sir Lancelot.  
A red-cross knight for ever kneel'd  
To a lady in his shield,  
That sparkled on the yellow field,  
Beside remote Shalott.*

*Alfred Tennyson*

## Chapter 9

In her home in Los Angeles, in a house she owns outright, paid off by the insurance money she received for the loss of her husband, Shauna wanders, feeling she's landed in someone else's life. They completely own the dishwasher, clothes washer and clothes drier, a high-end desktop and two laptop computers so Shauna can do her work at home or on location. Eliza can surf the net, text message her friends and study her character's backstory without ever stepping out. Shauna does yoga to stay in shape and Eliza, who used to go to dance classes, now practices pilates in the living room at least three times a week and yoga daily. She doesn't actually go anywhere anymore, Shauna realizes. She never leaves the house. With Theo in England and William finally on his own entirely, Shauna and Eliza can do pretty well what they like right through the next decade or two, one of the great advances of the last century being that two women can live like this. They are full of spirit, so why should they have that maudlin picture of a dead young woman Eliza insisted they hang on a wall in her bedroom, that painting of doom?

Poor Lady, she lived there in her tower knowing nothing except what she might have learned from shadows, hints of life reflected in her mirror and created in her tapestry weaving. Shauna asks her daughter sitting across from her on the sofa, knitting,

- What interests you about that poem?

And Eliza shrugs,

- I don't know. I'm making tea. Would you like a cup?
- Hmm?
- A cup. Would you like a cup of tea?

Eliza asks again, because Shauna's thoughts have drifted far away. She had heard the question the first time but had thought, it isn't a cup of tea but a cup of wine I want. A cornucopia of fruit distilled down so that its essence is wine, strong, and its bouquet, even the thought of its bouquet, can make me drunk. The cup that is the Grail, the cup that held Christ's blood, for Shauna is indeed a historian.

Some history. The story of the *Lady of Shalott* is not a genuine legend, Shauna learns, but a story nearly wholly constructed by the Victorian Tennyson. If it were a legend this lady would be subject to some god or man but instead is simply obedient to her fate, some strange curse that is her life. Shauna prefers Tennyson's tale of King Arthur and the Holy Grail, a tale about seeking and finding, always seeking and always finding. History. Commission the knights. Fill their heads with this vision of the Holy Grail. The quest for a vessel proves mightier than the sword, clichéd penis and vagina, the same old quest.

Shauna's mind wanders back to a family photo, her favourite photo of Theo, William and Eliza with their father. He is watering the back lawn, a big arc of water shooting from his garden hose. Theo is wearing wet boxer shorts while five-year-old William has stripped off his clothes entirely. William would have been angry even as a little boy had he known she had photographed his nakedness, and he might not be pleased if he knew she still treasures the photo. He holds a sword as he dashes in and around the arch of water, and there is baby Eliza sitting on this side of the rainbow created by the spray, sitting with the straw basket she used to hold her private treasures. The composition: two boys, a sword, a girl, her basket, a rainbow. The quest for a Holy Grail. Desire. Shauna realizes that desire isn't what is to be contained but is the container.

The empire casts its shadow over the Celtic King Arthur legend in Tennyson's telling and he doesn't tell the lady's tale well. It is as English as beige food, the story of *The Lady of Shalott*, Italian in origin, part Italian, part English. "Like me," Eliza informs her mother. Eliza insists

that Tennyson's source for *The Lady of Shalott* is not Malory's *Lily Maid of Astolat*. The source is an Italian novel, *Donna di Scalotta*, that inspired Tennyson. Eliza says that Tennyson claims he took the story directly from the Italian source.

Eliza is not a historian like her mother, not so detached. She is an actor and when she takes a part it becomes her, an obsession, and Eliza researches her obsessions obsessively. Sometimes she asks Shauna to collaborate though, as she did this time, and they both enter passionately into the research. For Shauna, it's a sweet distraction from her own project that she's all but abandoned. They cannot verify the source, but it's not for want of trying. Eliza starts, of course, by googling the poem and Tennyson sites before becoming so desperate as to ask her mother who repeats her daughter's attempts with no better outcome. She takes the project to the experts, conducts online title searches in university libraries with the librarians' help. The source is not to be found anywhere. Shauna thinks perhaps Eliza simply gave her the incorrect spelling but Eliza insists that it is correct. It becomes an information age version of a scavenger hunt. Both mother and daughter set off with a list of objects from Tennyson's work, various ladies from Arthurian legends, in this case objects of knowledge, to see who can find the most items on the list first. Sometimes they both go online or Shauna goes to Central Library or UCLA and Eliza remains at home on her laptop. They both come back empty handed. If the book exists neither can find it, nor could several competent librarians whom Shauna consults. All they discover is this: There is a Lady of Astolat who committed suicide for love of Lancelot, but Tennyson claimed it had nothing to do with his story, that in fact he did not know the story of Elaine, The Lady of Astolat, when he penned *The Lady of Shalott*. He said he would not have written his poem had he known the other story. Yet neither Shauna nor her daughter believe him. This is subterfuge. He had to have known, the stories are so similar, both ladies in their towers throwing their lives away for want of Lancelot's love, Elaine knowing, the lady not knowing, that it is love.

Then again, perhaps the story is not about love at all, perhaps it is all a mirror game, certainly it is at least that. The lady creates her tapestry from the mirrored images that reflect what is beyond the window; that is the first level of media subterfuge. Smoke and mirrors, or in this case smoky mirrors; the lady is not the first woman with a complex relationship with mirrors. Read history, Shauna advises. Aristotle believed that a mirror would tarnish if a menstruating woman looked at her image, that something of herself is

imparted in her image so that a bloody cloud would stain newly polished metal if it reflected her image.

- Oh, gross.

Eliza responds to the insights of the great philosopher. She's on a roll: there's the mirror in the temple of Despoina, daughter of Demeter, her temple at Lycosura in Arcadia. She goes into the bathroom to take the hand mirror and play multiple reflections to compare it with the legends. If one looked into this mirror one's own reflected image was faint, indistinct, or indeed there was no image at all except the reflection of the goddess that shone brightly, most distinct. On the other hand there's Medusa whose direct gaze was so powerful that if she looked at Perseus he was dead meat. She finds what she's looking for in Wikipedia:

*"Medusa means 'sovereign female wisdom,' in Sanskrit it's Medha, Greek Metis, Egyptian Met or Maat. Medusa was actually imported into Greece from Libya where she was worshipped by the Libyan Amazons as their Serpent-Goddess. Medusa (Metis) was the destroyer aspect of the Great Triple Goddess also called Neith, Anath, Athene or Ath-enna in North Africa and Athana in 1400 c. BC Minoan Crete. ("Women in Antiquity" Alicia Le Van, 5/7/96)*

And there are 190,000 images available if you follow the links.

Medusa's power was reduced in its reflection, Perseus realized, so he polished the surface of a bronze shield and used it as a mirror against her, to see Medusa without looking at her, her image reflected and her power deflected. Off with her head, he cries and performs the bloody deed of beheading her, then sticks her head into his sack. Now he doesn't have to look Medusa straight in the eyes or fear her gaze. He's got her in the bag. And he never needs to be separated from her either. He has the power to control death now that Medusa's life is taken away. Eliza revels in such myths, prints them until reams of paper carpet the floor. This is so obscure; read history, Shauna advises her daughter time and again.

- Darling, it's time you read some history, then go forward and get a real life.

- Mom, get a date.
- I would but I never meet women I'm interested in.
- Don't give me that shit, Mom. I know you're not lesbian.
- I'm a lesbian if it means you'll leave me alone about dating men.
- I don't care if you go out with women, as long as you go out.
- I go out. I go to the library.
- Dad's been dead over three years, Mom.

Eliza is right, in fact. What good has history ever done her? It began simply as an interest in historical properties and has ballooned to an obsession with the history of history, and now has led her nowhere. She is rethinking her theory of history herself as she fell asleep, thinking about how she had seen Eliza earlier that day, the way the mirror in the hall caught her reflection although Eliza did not register her own reflection, in fact seemed to be looking beyond the mirror's surface as if there were something behind the mirror or maybe down the hall where Shauna stood. Eliza was simply passing through the hall, had no need to linger in front of the mirror but did hesitate and that's when Shauna noticed her daughter entering the hall, seeing the mirror and her daughter's reflection.

Shauna fell asleep considering her daughter's look, the reflection, and dreamed of Eliza's father looking at her and then over at Eliza: Ted with the eyes of a Gorgon. Those eyes, they had no deadly power because it was only his reflection she saw in her mirror, yet when Shauna woke up her night shirt was wet, cold and clammy, clinging to her chilled body, soaked through with her own perspiration. She had to change her clothes.

Now her daughter is obsessed with a story that, if not directly related, seems so very close to this literary theme of death by vision that it makes Shauna crazy, and worse. Mirrors and suicidal maniacs. Shauna cannot abide suicidal maniacs, and despite Tennyson's literary intentions, the story of the Holy Grail is still out there. By tying his Lady to Sir Lancelot and by penning an intriguing poem, Tennyson knots two traditions together as tightly as any of the lady's own stitchery. In contrast, she and Ted conceived

their children with hybrid vigour, half-Celtic, half-Italian, in thoroughly secular love. It is not so difficult for Shauna to think back to their births, thinking back through Eliza who is now full grown, who has been knitting all day. With Theo who grew over six feet tall and gangly, wise and sullen, it is otherwise, nearly impossible to remember the baby boy born so soon after their first, William, who arrived as the fussy old man she knows so well today. But with Eliza there is an unbroken thread still holding just as the umbilical cord first held her to Shauna, and still Eliza doesn't break away. Eliza sits there knitting.

One version of the story of the Holy Grail that Shauna unravels was Queen Elizabeth I's favourite; the Queen a genuine heroine nevertheless admiring these careless mythical women—they seem beneath her. Surely, they set off with good intentions. The cup was used at the Last Supper, then again used to collect Jesus' blood, and this same cup was brought by the three Marys (the Blessed Virgin, Mary Magdalene, and Mary wife of Cleophas) directly from Golgotha across the Mediterranean, across the straits of Gibraltar. Crossing the dangerous Bay of Biscay in a little boat, the women spilled not a drop. Making no stop at all in Rome (hence the independence of the English church) they continued north and across the English Channel to place the Holy Grail in the Celtic settlement of Glastonbury in Somersetshire. However, they did not find a safe little tabernacle in which to store the Grail there in the British Isle, not these sailor ladies who demonstrated considerable navigation skills. In the end they proved to be completely inept at housekeeping. They misplaced their treasure. The Holy Grail went missing, no explanation offered.

Thus began a whole new covey of stories, knightly quests, endless searching for the Holy Grail. Lancelot is a knight in King Arthur's court, King Arthur, that legendary cuckold in the legends of the Holy Grail. The Grail, container, a cornucopia. Which brings us to Cornwall and the mythic castle of Camelot upon which the Lady of Shalott cannot cast her eyes because of a curse we know nothing about. She sits before a huge mirror, weaving reflections, a tapestry, a web of images twice removed.

Shauna reads the poem again tonight, attired in her fresh dry nightgown, sitting up in bed reading, having given up her attempt to slip back to sleep. She wonders what this poetry has to do with her and her daughter, two modern women living in a lovely house, freshly painted inside and out for a sale that is not happening. Her house also has a lovely garden. Mother and daughter live peaceably together in the decade of the twenty-first century. What do they care for the three Marys carelessly misplacing the Grail?

She and her daughter aren't churchgoers. They live in Los Angeles wholly unconcerned with the Church of England's relative autonomy from Rome. So why consider it at all?

Eliza has taken up this old-fashioned habit, knitting. She knits endlessly now and this is the tale she knits into her scarves as her meditations and the yarn twist and knot into scarves: a tale of knights questing and women losing blood, not their own but Christ's blood. This is the story of the Grail, the story of the container, not the contained. Eliza, the actress, if she were to speak of it at all, might explain that what she is about is merely an experiment. However, she doesn't talk about what is happening. Shauna pressed her yesterday,

- Dear, you need some fresh air. Come to the store with me.

Eliza said no.

- I'm just trying this out, to see what it is like to stay here all day, for days, you know, to live like a monk.

- To live like the lady.

- Yes, like her, or like a monk.

- But monks garden. Come into the garden with me.

- Mother . . .

It is exactly like when Liza Bear was six, this *mothering* her. Witchy mother. Mother on the other side of understanding. Mother who is forever old and stupid or worse, young.

- Mother, why don't you act your age?

Or working.

- Why can't you be like my friends' mothers who drive them everywhere?

Or wise.

- Mother, do you think you know everything?

Scientist daughter. She doesn't recognize that this behaviour simply doesn't work as an experiment, at least not in the sense that she intends, as a harmless exercise. The effects could be benign or fatal; there may be little predictability at the outset. The observed phenomena and the observer are more intimate than lovers; there is no casual science the equivalent of casual sex. Both the phenomena and the observer are changed; that is the phenomena. Eliza has studied so little natural science, certainly no philosophy of science.

- You should have stayed in school and studied science.

Shauna actually said that to her daughter a few weeks ago and Eliza finally rested her knitting needles in her lap. She regrets that now, sitting on the edge of her bed in a fresh night gown, regrets pressing her daughter with logic, her own logic. It has nothing to do with observation, Eliza explained, inclined to dispel the silence Shauna left behind in the wake of her logic. It is the experience, to make something so just by wishing it to be so, only in the imagination.

- Really, Mother, I don't intend to *do* anything dangerous.

Then she explained.

- Can't people just let things simply be? Can you just let me be?

There was mostly silence and again the clicking sound of knitting needles quelled the questioning that lay between them. What Eliza said to her mother finally is:

- I really want this part, Mother. I know how you feel about being on set but perhaps this will be the last time. I'll be almost old enough and then you'll be free, the curse broken at last.

Eliza's part in this, then, is that it is simply a part. She is studying for the part of the lady. She is embarrassed to be working so diligently for a part she hasn't yet been booked for, but she knows it is hers if she wants it. She told Shauna yesterday.

- I know it's a stupid script, Mom. And I'd prefer to perform it onstage, night after night, live.
- Why live?
- I don't know why. I guess it's just one of those things. But instead it's a movie. And it's a terrible, terrible movie. Still, I want to play The Lady. You want to see the new draft, Mother? It's slightly improved. Here, take a look.

She handed her mother the script, and Shauna remembers this as if Eliza is standing right there. Eliza struck a pose and freezes. She holds the pose for barely a beat, as in a freeze frame, appearing diaphanous, ghostlike in the indirect light from the window, such that Shauna gasps. Eliza rolls her eyes, ready to make her exit, but hesitates in the doorway, waiting for Shauna's reaction to the new opening. Shauna holds her gaze and then looks down at the pages she now holds. Of course, that's what you do with an actress, Shauna ponders, just pretending to read. We look, not at the script or even at the story that is as abstract as history; we look at her and we see her. Perhaps we also listen, but it is the eye that consumes the image and not merely the image, but also that which is imaged. Seeing is a form of cannibalism. Everyone who goes in front of the camera seems to find it so, that it is mortifying: *morte*. It is death. Eliza passes the script to Shauna who begins to read it from its beginning:

#### 1. EXT. DAY. AERIAL PAN OVER CAMELOT

The pan above the hills and along a river to a castle on an island in the river, then on toward Camelot, the mythical kingdom. Outside its marble walls are fields and fields of wild flowers, crackling creeks and enchanted woods.

Pan over the castle, and at this distance there is the sight and SOUND OF LAUGHING. People below are dancing and feasting.

It is Mayday and the court is celebrating around a Maypole, the crystal, stained glass castle in the background reaching far into the clouds and a pastel sky. The entire kingdom echoes

happiness and laughter because, after all, this is the most perfect place in the world.

Shauna is already lost and asks.

- What do they want? What do any of these people want? And how the hell do they plan to pull off an opening shot like that for an ultra-low budget indie?
- I have no idea.
- Green screen?
- Maybe CGI using game software. Something like *Second Life*. That's what I would do. Whatever. I suspect it'll look like shit.

Eliza put the ear buds back in, searched her playlist for the recording by Loreena McKennit who set the tale to music on her 1991 album *The Visit*. Eliza again wonders aloud why her mother doesn't know the music, what was her mother listening to in 1992?

- The early 90's was a time of great music, you know, Mother. See? I don't read history, I listen to it.

What Shauna knew before about the lady she cannot say now. The mimetic quality that Eliza insists is key is lost on the historian; at least at first. She knew the King Arthur legends and the history of the legends, although the legends do not stand up well to historical scrutiny. There might never have been a man who was King Arthur nor the historical figure named Lancelot, yet there is literal truth, the truth of literature contained in Tennyson's oeuvre, retained as a vague shadowy memory of the distracted high school student that was Shauna in Oswego twenty-five years ago, and recalled merely as the Victorians. The exact poem she could not recall until Eliza recited it to her, and now is it the poem itself or the poem interpreted in the script and by Eliza before Eliza even recited the poem to her. The order of things is so difficult to untangle—is it the character drawn by the writer or Eliza's presentation that Shauna recalls? This problem is the same as what she experiences when she screens a movie adaptation of a novel she's loved; as if the screen overwrites the page and the original file can

never be retrieved. Eliza has taken on the story in her manner, so absorbed is she in this arcane literature, so now Shauna merely examines its context. According to the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*:

### Colonialism and Gender

Because colonialism is fundamentally a power relationship between a patriarchal authority and a subordinate people conceived as essentially different from their rulers, discourse about colonialism becomes interwoven in complex ways with discourse about gender. Writers use images and vocabulary of racial difference to represent female appetite and aggression, and terrifying images of female savagery often convey fear of a racial other.

The terrifying image for Shauna is not one of female appetite and aggression, but of loss of appetite, in particular Eliza's, and she senses her own complicity in her daughter's self-abnegation. They don't have to be here, living alone, mother and daughter. They could travel together or apart, go visit Theo in England, do the grand tour of Europe since Eliza hasn't booked anything for the fall. Shauna will have to pose this possibility with tact, since Eliza won't immediately view the fact of having nothing booked as opportunity, not even as it stands in the tradition of the Grand Tour of Tennyson's time when the privileged offspring of England might spend two or more years travelling around Europe to broaden their horizons, to learn French perhaps, and be exposed to art, architecture, geography, at least the geography of Paris, Rome, Venice, and Florence. Eliza and Shauna indeed enjoy more freedom than the medieval kings of Europe, more than King Arthur himself. They have better food to eat, more variety and fresh vegetables even in winter, more opportunity, education, entertainment, fine clothes and good luggage. What is to hold them here on the edge of the American West?

Theo suggests they visit him. He has said how much he himself enjoys London, how he can show them around, and then they could go walking in the Lake District. Shauna doesn't oppose that idea. She has been there before with the children. Unlike her son, she knows she could not be happy living in England. In fact, England's entire colonial project suddenly made sense to her during her visit that summer. Acclimatized as she already was to California weather and Tex-Mex foods, by the third day in a cold London



drizzle, huddling inside a fish and chips hut, Shauna found herself more sympathetic to the colonialists who might have been desperate for some flavour in their food and a warm place to stay.

Shauna remembers retreating from London, to hike the path along the Cornwall cliffs near Tintagel, travelling through the landscape Eliza now studies, the presumed birthplace of King Arthur if there ever was such a king. There are photos. She must sort the photos someday.

*The gemmy bridle glitter'd free,  
Like to some branch of stars we see  
Hung in the golden Galaxy.  
The bridle bells rang merrily  
As he rode down to Camelot:  
And from his blazon'd baldric slung  
A mighty silver bugle hung,  
And as he rode his armor rung  
Beside remote Shalott.*

## Chapter 10

- What are you doing for Halloween?

Shauna feigns a nonchalant attitude, asking a simple question as she pours tea and splits the English muffin to toast. She tries to erase any undertones as the words cross over her pallet. Her back is turned so her daughter can't read concern on her face.

- Nothing.
- Really?
- What are you doing?
- Nothing much. I suppose we can carve a pumpkin, give out candy. We can decorate the yard. You want to help?
- Really? Yeah, sure.

Shauna decides to ignore the note of sarcasm in Eliza's tone.

- You want to have your friends over? You can make a haunted house or something.

- They're busy. I think they're all going to the West Hollywood parade.
- And you're not?
- No. It's lame.
- Ten thousand gay men dressed as nuns?
- Yeah, lame.

When the children were little Shauna simply piled the few photos she took, mostly on holidays, into boxes that have remained on the top shelf of her bedroom closet, seldom taken down, never placed in albums. Halloween was always a favourite. Shauna knows there are pictures from almost every Halloween in one of the boxes, Eliza as an owl, a ballerina, a witch, Theo as Spider Man, then Harry Potter several years running, William as a shark, finally a goalie. Also there are photos from their trip to the coast of Wales somewhere in there. These might serve Eliza well in her research, rekindle her childhood memories of the landscape she studies so intently now at such a distance. At the last minute their father had to teach a class for the dean, so Shauna and the children went on ahead. Shauna remembers the breathtaking views, and treasures the pictures in her mind of her children who seemed so at home there, the coast to which their father never arrived and currently Theodore junior has returned. She will take the photos down. Eliza seems to have conflated memories of that trip with those of the Simi Valley petting zoo, and her grandmother's home in Upstate New York.

Shauna remembers keenly how one afternoon on the English coast she had taken her nose out of her books, a tour book open on her lap and a history book she had set inside her opened tour book, and watched her three children, Theo and eight-year-old Liza Bear scampering like the sheep along the cliffs, William hanging back, worrying perhaps about the cow pies raised like Swiss dots in the fields. Shauna had taken the history books along on this trip but remembers little of what she read. She remembers Liza Bear later climbing the cliffs, more mountain goat than human child, Theo looking out over the water as it rolled in beneath his feet and William standing there on the path, tapping his foot, impatient.

Shauna asks, in relation to Tennyson's poem, if Eliza remembers the cliffs and the surf and Eliza says no, no she doesn't. She doesn't remember about the cliffs nor the ruins of the castle. All she can clearly recall was a stairwell going down to the water, and then oh, yes, she says, she remembers *that*, yes, a castle of course. But she's not certain which castle. There was more than one, wasn't there? Eliza insists:

- This I certainly don't remember. I don't remember any people, or the lilies Tennyson talks about, people looking down at the lilies. I only remember lots of grass. Don't you think I would remember this? Maybe he just made shit up.

Eliza recites a few lines of the poem again perfectly from memory:

And up and down the people go,  
Gazing where the lilies blow  
Round an island there below,  
The island of Shalott.

Of course, they have travelled so much since then and Shauna doesn't remember lilies either, not in Great Britain, not on that trip and they haven't returned altogether as a family. There are frequent jaunts through Upstate New York where Shauna grew up and where her mother still lives, along the south shore of Lake Ontario near Oswego, in one of those old wood frame homes overlooking the lake, one with a widow's walk. Shauna sat up there as a child and never gave much thought about the name of the small windowed enclosure atop the house. Back then she was a pirate in the crow's nest on the mainsail's mast, or a parrot on the uppermost branch of the canopy in the rain forest, there alone, a small girl looking for a place to hide and to read on a summer's day. She would remain in the house because she had been told she must, that it was too hot to play outdoors. So she hid away from her sisters, and in particular from her mother and once she fell asleep up there. Eventually the police were called; her parents and the neighbors concerned that she had been kidnapped or drowned. Her mother, whom Shauna can hardly remember as a young woman, cannot recall enough details even to situate her in that time, and cannot remember that day at all.

That old wood frame house is certainly no castle but for little Liza Bear the attic and the widow's walk held its charm. Shauna, Ted and the children

used to fly regularly in and out of New York City to get the cheaper flights. Visiting the Big Apple was generally the most satisfying aspect of these trips back East, Shauna's reward for having fulfilled her filial duty. She and Ted also took the children on three last-minute flights to the Caribbean, one to Mexico City and Oaxaca. Incidents from one trip blend into the memories of another for her as well as for Eliza. Shauna tries to recall different events in different places but memory shatters events, a broken mirror. Even poignant memories as that trip to England, standing there on the cliffs, sometimes seem as shattered as Tennyson's mirror in the poem.

Some things certainly are worth remembering; their travels fostered Shauna's interest in the history and she eventually became a member of the California Historical Society. She authored a pamphlet about the Biltmore Hotel, and soon after her interests shifted to historical houses which, of course, relates to her career choice, real estate. Now history provides a bridge she can cross back over whenever she reaches the point where she can barely stand the company of other real estate agents. Among themselves, she observes, no matter where a conversation begins it ends in a discussion of property values. She has tried another tack, risked an onslaught of racist remarks if she were to explain that the city's shifting demographics is actually resulting in an increase in attendance in Catholic churches and Islamic mosques. The point being . . . ? The other agents' eyes glaze over and one or two might actually walk away mid-sentence.

Over time Shauna found she spent less and less time with agents and more time with historians, all of whom seem to have real estate issues and turn to her with their questions so in the end history does not provide much distraction. So Shauna finds herself in a kind of double exile. Perhaps, Shauna considers, it is time to return home again and visit her mother.

When Shauna became a widow herself she remembered the name of the room, called the widow's walk, and home for Thanksgiving that year she climbed up to the small room and stared out across Lake Ontario. It was cold and early snow on the shingles below reflected a blinding bright light through the dirty grey windows. Shauna washed a small circle of glass with her own spit on her sleeve, so that she could peer through. She watched and thought about other wives who might have stood up there. Perhaps sailors' wives or fishermen's wives or loggers' wives, or wives whose husbands worked the canals, men who would be gone for months at a time with wives who stood in such rooms looking out over the lake, waiting for their husbands to return, to glimpse the bows of their husbands' boats on the horizon. But these rooms are not called the wives' watch, rather

the widow's walk, and there she was, a widow looking out over the lake, wondering what it was she was watching for.

In Los Angeles there are occasionally strange rooms like the widows' walk in old craftsman style houses. Perhaps she should try to purchase one of these if Eliza were willing to move to the East Hollywood. But in fact Shauna prefers her garden to any room at all and Eliza prefers the kitchen table where she and her little friends used to stand to drink their milk or sun tea and eat brownies after school. Later, as they grew, the faces and the snack menu changed. Sara and Eliza would sit with pots of herbal teas and baby carrots if they were dieting, and otherwise with pop and chips or pizza or cake with Häagen Dazs ice cream. John and Kathy enjoyed Shauna's rice crispy squares and they were never on diets. Most of Eliza's high school friends were also performers of one sort or another and all playful. They would come and fill the house with their noise and they would eat and complain and laugh, sometimes eating incredible quantities of food, moving back and forth between the kitchen and the living room, changing roles and voices so quickly it was hard for Shauna to keep track of who was who. Even when there were just two or three of them they could nevertheless make a roomful of characters, a kaleidoscope of faces. Randy would play Tina Turner's songs and lip sync the words, gyrating his hips to appear a big woman although he was a terribly thin young man, stroking the wall with his entire body, rubbing up against its surface like a cat. No. Not like a cat. Like Tina Turner. But it would appear lewd the way it doesn't when Tina Turner moves that way. "What's love got to do, got to do with it?" Randy adored Tina Turner. Eliza preferred, still prefers the soulful Aretha Franklin, the Soul Goddess. Not Venus but Aretha. Finally Shauna would retreat to her bedroom those nights when Eliza's friends stayed late, and she would listen to their talk and play through the door, delighted.

Then suddenly it stopped. Eliza's friends are either busy finishing up their last year in high school, desperate to score high on their SATs to offset their grade-point averages, or they are already off to college, except Stanley who might be in jail for all they know. If Eliza knows, she doesn't say. She never mentions him anymore. She reads or knits or she sits there doing nothing, or so it seems to Shauna.

Shauna could invite Eliza to sit out in the garden with her, to watch the ruby throated hummingbird feast on the honeysuckle, but Eliza will make a pot of tea instead and suggest they take the tea into the kitchen where everything is easy. Eliza has been without work since the end of summer and, because Shauna is on leave from real estate and because it is

late fall, at this moment neither of them is working and this has been the story for some weeks. It is getting difficult to know how to be together and how to leave each other alone. Eliza has taken the poetry magnets on the refrigerator door and arranged them to express all she has to say about the almost imperceptible change of seasons they experience in Los Angeles, little more than a change in mood:

In spring I do  
In fall I do

It gets hotter the next week. Shauna tries to figure out what the rest of the world is doing, now that this determined quiet has set in. Down by Fairfax High there is a buzz of course, the students hanging out on the sidewalk, crowding the corner of Melrose and Fairfax, and further east. Eliza might at least enroll at Fairfax High if she is to go any longer without work. That school is one bridge she hasn't yet burned. They have to take her, perhaps in their night school program at least. If Eliza isn't in school, Shauna feels at least she should keep track of where and whether Eliza should be in school, and feel badly that Eliza isn't attending.

In fact, nothing happens. There is just this vague missing, the change being that nothing changes.

The garden has reached its yellow period, blue cosmos pale and dusty, the ash turning copper then brown. It is too late to make repairs to the border, to split and transplant perennials. The plants have died back with the drought. She will hold everything over until spring, merely pruning the roses so that they blossom for Christmas and perhaps put some spring bulbs in the refrigerator to dig in later under the compost she will spread soon.

She explores the compost heap with her bare hands, hoping the slugs died in the drought. Of course, the moisture from the compost saved them. Okay. Compost is manna in a desert garden. This morning she loads the black gold into buckets and spreads it everywhere. The heap that looked small tucked behind the cedar yields bushel after bushel that she shovels until her back aches. She stands to stretch up into the sunlight, into that particular harsh noonday white light. Lunchtime.

Eliza, in the kitchen reading, sits at the table. Shauna can see the top of her head through the back door window, her head bent forward over a book. She could ask her daughter to come out into the garden, to eat lunch

outdoors, but Liza Bear will only roll her eyes. She will say that she is not hungry, that she is studying.

These studies are something Shauna doesn't understand. Eliza is not looking for facts or memorizing facts; she produces nothing except the character she plays, and Shauna feels lost even to herself. She should have been able to contribute something over the years, at least been able to teach Eliza basic maths. Shauna understands math and feels she should have been able to pass at least this much on, and the practical applications. For instance, she can estimate what kind of mortgage a client can manage, what will be the likely return on an investment. Useful formulas; these are some things she understands. She also understands creating the space for another's imagination—this must be sometime akin to her daughter's art—how to make someone imagine their life unfolding within a particular space. She can help the seller choose the neutral paint, make only the basic repairs, and remove enough clutter and certain pieces of furniture, leaving barely enough so that a potential buyer imagines themselves in the clear comfortable space. Shauna can help make this particular house in this particular location the stage upon which the client imagines their life unfolding. As a real estate agent Shauna busied herself looking over listings, arranging showings and supplying recipes of fragrant foods that, if baked, fill the house with happy associations so that the smell will sell the house. And now when she is not working she is out in her garden still being productive, which is why she supposes they call plants 'produce.' She produces vegetables for soup and bouquets for the table, not as an actor but as the set designer. Still, all art is in the details. One must specialize to achieve competence if not perfection. Domestic real estate agents generally limit themselves to two genres, family saga and romantic comedy.

Eliza on the other hand has only herself to work with—makeup and costume being another's art altogether. Shauna enjoyed watching the transformations when Eliza first began acting; but as the years passed the job itself seemed self-defeating, though not as much as modelling perhaps, where one even tries to erase her own form.

Shauna leans over to pick the last of the iris blooming by the kitchen door and plucks some tomatoes from the window sill as she enters the kitchen now. She puts the flowers in a vase and the tomatoes in a pot with water, basil, salt and pepper. Eliza sits there, puts down her book and picks up her knitting, but what really is she knitting? Shauna hasn't seen a garment completed all fall. She hesitates, then asks anyway.

- What were you up to all morning?
- Studying.
- What are you studying?
- Can I do anything to help you there?
- You can set the table, either in here or out in the garden.
- Let's eat inside. I don't want to freckle.

Eliza puts aside her knitting to place the plates, the bowls, napkins and silverware out on the kitchen table. She has lost the random excited motions of girls that are similar to kittens, probably all young creatures. No more the frantic texting one friend as she laughs with another on the landline, while downloading new music into her iPod and painting her toenails. These days she moves as carefully as a nun.

- Aren't you the least bit bored?
- No.
- You could start looking into some colleges, sit in on their open lectures, get to know people. Why don't you look into the performance arts program at Loyola Marymount?
- Why would I study something I'm already doing? If I'm going back to school it's to study physics.
- You don't know anything about physics.
- Exactly.
- Did I get any calls?
- Are you expecting a call?
- No. Well, yes. Your grandmother is supposed to phone today.

- No, she didn't call yet. Mom, if Stanley called on our landline while I was out would you tell me?
- You never go out.
- But if I did, would you tell me?
- Of course I'd tell you. I'd also tell the police.
- Don't joke about that, Mother.
- I'm not joking.
- Well, if you called the police on my boyfriend I might never speak to you again.
- Eliza, are you kidding? He's a criminal.
- No, I'm not kidding, and just so you know, I don't want to talk about it.
- I think maybe we . . .
- No.
- Surely he'd use your cell phone.
- No. Remember? I changed my cell phone number. There's no listing for it.
- Let's have lunch.
- I'm not really hungry.

Eliza needs only to complete two correspondence courses she enrolled in last year to finish her high school diploma. She can begin a theatre arts programme at UCLA, at least in Extension, or maybe USC or at least the state schools. They can look into American Film Institute, Shauna suggests. Eliza rolls her eyes.

- There's no way I can get into those programs with my schedule and my grade point average I don't know what they teach in those schools that you can't learn simply by doing it anyway.
- You never know what you'll learn; it's often a surprise. What are Paul and Tom doing?
- They're back in New York, I guess.
- In school?
- I guess. If I go back to school I'm going to study rocket science.
- Fine. Rocket science then.

Speaking for herself here, when Shauna took her real estate course she learned more about banking than buildings, and that actually proved quite useful. Perhaps they teach filmmakers banking. Perhaps they should if they don't. It would perhaps be useful to Eliza someday, now that her waitressing career is over. It would keep her mind occupied, get her out with people her own age. *The Lady of Shalott* is pushed back some more and nothing else is going on right now, not that she's right for. There's nothing, at least not for now. This is not unusual.

Over a family dinner, Theo had once warned Eliza that in Hollywood you can't count on anything until you see the check. William said you can't count on it until the check clears. Eliza in fact knows more about this than any of them and said you can't count on anything until the premiere. Still, they are her big brothers; she gives them airtime. William had said,

- Focus on your studies. At least finish high school.

Shauna couldn't help herself and jumped in.

- Let me get you enrolled in Marlborough.
- Yeah, like they'll accept me. If St. Jude's won't take me back, Mom, none of those private schools will let me in.

- St. Jude's will take you back, if you would simply just . . .
- Focus on your studies, just what I said.

William interjected, running his hands through his already thinning hair.

- Anyway, it will be a big waste of money, you guys. I can tell them I won't, just so they let me back in, but we all know when I get offered a part, I'm going to take it.

But now with no immediate work, Eliza wants to study for the stage, for a possible stage production of *The Lady of Shalott* even though she is not guaranteed the role of the lady even in the movie, even if the movie ever gets made, and meanwhile there is nothing else. The conversation about Eliza returning to school seems like it occurred years, not months ago.

This evening, when William gets home from work, he calls. Shauna talks into the receiver loud enough that Eliza will hear from where she sits in the living room.

- William, no, I've never been. Is it like the Farmer's Market? Okay, I believe you . . . Well, the market here is authentic. Organic farmers . . . Okay, I'm not going to argue with you . . . I'm thrilled. You will make it all yourself . . . Wonderful! Sure I'll email you my recipe. Certainly. Okay, yes, that would be so much better and we can simply pop it in the oven. Yes, bacon strips around the outside. Oh, sweet William, I never thought we'd be exchanging recipes . . . You know your sister has gone vegetarian, so keep vegetables to the side and the potatoes. No, we can just roast them separately.

Eliza fills in enough to understand that it is William on the other end of the line, and that he's discovered the Grand Street Market downtown. He's learning to cook now that he can get fresh ingredients cheaply. He probably emphasizes the latter; Eliza knows her brother. He's so cheap he never bent his mother's ear about Whole Foods over on Fairfax where everything is fresh but expensive, though practically around the corner, or Whole Foods on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, Erewhon Natural Foods on Beverly, or even the Original Farmers Market on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, but these aren't cheap.

Shauna makes a mental note as William speaks, that now that he is an enthusiastic cook she can find presents for him there. He is difficult to buy for; this new interest presents a gifting opportunity.

The difference between the food sources in his old neighbourhood, of course, is that now William has to feed himself. Restaurants get expensive and whole meals can be had for less than five bucks in the Grand Street Market downtown. Take-out. Eliza gets it. She listens to her mother coo.

- Oh, I can't wait to see you. I love you too . . . Okay . . . Eliza, your brother wants to talk with you.

Shauna calls into the dining room where Eliza sits eavesdropping, books piled on the table and a script for the movie that has been shelved spread out, her would-be lines highlighted in fluorescent yellow marker. Eliza, carrying the pages with her to the phone, comes to her mother on the sofa by the window. Shauna passes her the phone and Eliza wanders out back to the table, the cell phone propped on her shoulder next to her ear.

Shauna laughs to see her daughter suddenly so crooked and casual, only half listening to her brother, half answering.

- Yep . . . Yep . . . . Yes . . .

Perhaps William is changing, living downtown. Maybe you can teach old dogs new tricks. How is it that he is old so soon and yet only twenty-five, Shauna wonders. Where did he come from? Theo seems decades younger than his brother, not merely three years and Eliza seems born into another era.

Oh well, William will be here this weekend. He's providing Sunday dinner. Maybe she will be able to persuade Eliza and William to take a walk with her through the botanical garden at the university after dinner. The willows will be yellow boughs in wide arcs as the fine leaves are dropped like feathers, and they might cut some from the trees though that would be wrong. There are often potted plants left near the greenhouses for people to take, sometimes odd specimens. No, she'll simply buy a bouquet at the market on Thursday. She'll choose a fall arrangement of leaves, yellow and deep orange dahlias, maybe fill a bowl with gourds and squash. Perhaps William will talk with Eliza and find out what is going on. He might coax her to eat something more substantial than steamed vegetables. Eliza wanders back toward her mother, trying to get William off the line now.

- Of course I'm not going to invite him. No, we aren't speaking. I haven't seen him. I didn't even realize he was still topical. You want to speak to Mom? Okay. See you Sunday.

Eliza clicks the phone closed and passes it back to her mom.

- He said you discussed everything. Everything being the menu, I guess. Here, Mom.
- He hung up on you?
- He said you discussed everything. It's set.
- Eliza, did it ever occur to you . . . I mean, do you think William might be gay?
- A guy's gay because he's fucking other guys, not because he's learning to cook.
- Watch your mouth please. And I know straight men cook.
- He's gay for cooking.
- Was he asking you about Stanley?
- Everyone asks about Stanley.
- And what do you say?
- What's there to say?

## Chapter 11

William has everything timed perfectly for Sunday dinner. When they return from their walk he'll heat up the wild rice casserole to go with the baked Brie, which will serve as Eliza's main course since she's now vegetarian but not vegan, and he'll broil two steaks as well for himself and Shauna, with arugula salad. Shauna suggests they go to the botanical gardens. William's game but Eliza wants to stay behind, so just Shauna and William drive over to the Ballona wetlands near the development where Shauna and Eliza might have moved if their plans hadn't fallen apart.

It's nearly sunset when they arrive, the golden hour. Shauna points out a Belding's Savannah sparrow, spots a flycatcher darting above the cattails, but William is too far ahead to hear her, and calling to him would frighten the birds away. She sees her son's rounded shoulders up ahead and ponders, he knows she would appreciate it if he were open with her, though if he is gay and if Eliza is anorexic and since Theo is Theo, then maybe she'll never have any grandchildren. A wave of sadness passes over her, then passes away like the tide there beyond the boardwalk, rolling in and back out to the ocean. Maybe she's wrong about many things with her children. Maybe she's wrong about everything. They walk to the end of the boardwalk, and return to William's car, then home where he cooks and they feast. Only after William leaves and she and Eliza return to their respective solitudes does it occur to Shauna that Eliza really hardly touched the wild rice, or the Brie.

She picks up Eliza's yearbook from the last place she attended school regularly, that was lying on the side table and curls into a chair to read it, procrastinating on the stack of real estate correspondence her broker forwarded to her that lies waiting on the same table.

*"hey you sexy actress, you are the best and very talented. This year has gon by so fast. No matter what he says I do take your jokes seriously and for fuck sake write more. Lov lisa p.s. isn't it funny we both kinda have the same name and nothing else in common?"*

*"Eliza, Your last movie was so wicked stupid and yor the best friend and best actress ever so I just know you're going to be rich and famous and you don't need to take shit from anyone so have a great summer and let's get together when you're not to busy "filming". Love you always, Claire"*

*"Elize, so yeah! We've been through a lot this year. Let us reminis, long talks in your bathroom. Okay the bottom line is you have another month to change your mind about coming with me to New York and we can start again there gosh darn really everything will be great. Stan the man"*

Shauna thumbs through the book trying to remember what it was like when Eliza had friends and homework and everything seemed normal. She can hear Eliza singing before she even comes in from the kitchen

*"Start spreading the news, I'm leaving today.  
I'm going to be a part of it, New York New York?"*

She asks her daughter,

- Are you singing that song now simply to annoy me?
- No, that's just a lucky side effect.
- You could change the lyric to "I'm going to be a part of it, LA, LA." Then at least it would rhyme.
- Stanley taught me how to beat box it.



- What does Stanley have to do with this?
- I'm just saying I can beat box it.

Her lips tighten and her mouth drums a snare sound and then even a high-top, a whole drum set in her cheeks and tongue though she looks distracted. Shauna is shocked at the whole range of percussion emanating from her small daughter's lips. Eliza's got her iPod in her ear and turns up System of a Down, their music louder and hers now fading, her ears stopped so she's hearing only the music on her iPod and her own drumming.

Eliza could be anywhere but her eyes are closed and she's in Alphabet City in Manhattan like that day she lost her brother and her mom and spent the day in East Village and now the System's music makes her body disappear out her ears. Oh, they went to see the Blue Man Group show and a play together, something about Sympathetic Magic. Or was that an earlier trip with Theo and Willie? Yes, and they kept calling it Pathetic Magic just to piss Mom off because they were such boys.

Eliza begins humming the tune again and she doesn't even realize she's doing it.

The last time they spent any time in New York was the year before William finished his BA. Eliza and Shauna travelled together to spend part of the summer there. Shauna wanted to do some research at the Schomburg Institute. She intended to write a history pamphlet on a few of the churches and homes in New York that were stops in along the Underground Railroad. Eliza attended the summer drama course at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts though she was barely thirteen. They sublet a flat on Perry Street in the West Village and tried (Shauna did try, she would later insist) to live well there. Shauna knew it was a city that she could come to love, but Ted would never relocate. Even in blazing summer it seemed in deep shadow. Eliza was mostly a total bitch that summer and only later Shauna realized that most young girls go through a stretch of misery, up to an entire year of PMS. Shauna didn't miss her husband that summer. This surprised her but then he was merely across the continent, not on the other side of life, not like now. Despite Eliza's contrariness, she and Eliza were happy enough that summer. Eliza was supposed to be in class while Shauna was reading at the Institute. Yet Shauna was aware that Eliza was skipping classes and Eliza was aware that her mother didn't make it to the Institute every day. Shauna was spending more time at galleries and museums than at the library, an entire day in the catacombs, another at Dia and the shops

and galleries in Chelsea. There was an awkward encounter one afternoon when mother and daughter ran into each other in Washington Square. Another time Shauna confronted her daughter about a ticket stub for Ellis Island that she'd found tucked into Eliza's jean pocket when she checked them at the laundry, and Eliza waved in her mother's face a bar bill from a Soho cafe she'd found on Shauna's bureau when Shauna had said she'd been working all week at the Arthur Schomburg Center in Harlem. It was a draw until the August humidity hung over everything and Shauna announced,

- Enough. I miss your father. Don't you? We're going home.

California was home, the other side of the continent, the other side of the coin. New York all pretension, California all cowboys and valley girls and neon and stupid. It is the national myth, the national identity, the national joke. Shauna's thoroughbred white bread California daughter sits here, a teenager with access to a car and a boy on the brain, a convincing specimen assuring Shauna that all is normal, everything normal, except the sounds coming out of her daughter's mouth like a whole drum kit.

Shauna recognizes now another mistake that summer, their side trip to her mother's. Eliza learned at her grandmother's house how she'd been given a double dose of morose, learned how her family is replete with suicidal maniacs, heard from her grandmother the stories that stitch together and make up a crazy quilt that is Eliza's inheritance, a family heirloom passed on to her that she has no choice but to accept. Shortly after that summer Eliza started asking Shauna questions, questions about subjects to which Shauna herself hadn't ever given much thought and never mentioned to her children. Liza Bear had never met any of these people, except her grandmother. She never will. As for herself, Shauna preferred not to think about them. She rarely had until Eliza began asking so many questions.

Eliza now slips further into the world of her iPod, eyes half closed and mouth making drumming and hissing noises.

*“ . . . I've been walking through your streets,  
Where all you money's earning,  
Where all your building's crying,  
And clueless neckties working . . . ”*

And through the Systems' sound and she doing her own part, Eliza hears her mom say something, all muffled that yanks her back and she pulls off the ear pieces and it's like she's suddenly back from Oz. Her mother is asking her something, a question in a voice that sounds so loud because it is the only sound in the room now.

- What happened to Tom?

Eliza stops and looks over at her mom, puzzled and bemused.

- What are you talking about?
- That boy you knew in New York.
- Hmm . . . that was strange. I'd completely forgotten about him. Why do you ask? It's ancient history.
- How did you two even notice it was over?
- What do you mean?
- I mean your relationship with Tom. It's not like with Stanley. I mean, there were not police informing you it was over.
- Tom? That was just a sexual thing. When it's over it's over. You really don't want to hear about it.

Shauna stammers,

- No, 'er . . . Yes, I do want to talk about it.

A few months earlier Eliza had offered the information to Shauna that she is still a virgin, and that she intends to remain a virgin, she said, because it is easier and more fun. That is what she said and Shauna supposed she was right, although Shauna herself can hardly remember. Not that she has been so adventurous either. In fact, she was only likely to have two or three serious affairs in her life, about the same number as she has had to date, with long intervals between, the longest of course being that last love which will spread into eternity. Sometimes she wonders to whom she will

be married in eternity, to her first or last lover, or to her children's father to whom she made all those promises.

- Mom, why did you ask about Stanley?
- I asked about Tom.
- But in reference to Stanley.
- No . . .
- Did you see Tom's number on my 'recent calls' list?
- No.
- But then you did check.
- Check what?
- My cell phone, the list of recent calls.
- No. What are you talking about?
- You just said you didn't see Tom's number, so you must have checked it. Why would you do that? You want to know if Stanley phoned? What are you accusing me of doing?
- What are you accusing me of doing?
- Spying on me. Actually, you as much as admitted it, that you're monitoring my calls. I wish you wouldn't.
- I don't!
- Don't yell at me. You as much as admitted you do! You do spy on me.

- I didn't! I don't!
- I'll be in my room.
- Fine!

Shauna feels stunned in the wake of anger Eliza leaves behind her. Shauna hadn't thought about Stanley for some time. She was thinking about Tom, about the singularity of Eliza's attachments, so singular that Shauna must consider each as totally separate, an attachment with no pattern, no narrative thread, almost obsessive in each singularity. Eliza might change, might eventually come to have more involvements in a year than her mother will have in her lifetime. It is none of Shauna's business really. And she wouldn't have asked and she wouldn't have assumed that her daughter was still a virgin, especially not after that recent involvement with Stanley, which after the fact does seem rather serious, which is why Shauna thinks perhaps something must have gone very wrong even before the break-in, though she was sure the problem was not Eliza's.

Yet Shauna is not nostalgic about the time when Liza Bear was younger and they could talk about anything and would, a situation that Shauna regretted as soon as Eliza reached her late adolescence. More and more there were things Shauna didn't want to know, just as there were things she didn't want her daughter to know about, but Liza Bear chirped on and on, asking about everything and telling all. Shauna knew who was skipping school, who was in love with whom, and in what household someone was stealing money for drugs. Actually, that was one thing about which Eliza withheld information; Shauna wasn't privy to what friend was on what drug, only to the vague fact that there were drugs around and that Eliza wouldn't take any because they would interfere with her work, her acting. She was always quite serious about her acting.

Eliza starts laughing and pulls one bud out of her ear.

- I remember, Mom. It was when I went to get his birthday gift. I wanted to buy him something totally frivolous and I thought maybe cologne, so I asked the sales clerk. 'He's just sixteen,' I told her. 'He probably doesn't even wear deodorant.' 'How about Eternity?' she suggested. It gave me tingles up my spine and I asked her, 'Is there a fragrance I'll call you?' Don't you

have something called One-Night-Stand?' When it's over you know.

- Yes, I suppose you know.

They are not good at this romantic love business. Shauna had hoped Eliza would be better than she.

- Mom, what were all these barges for? Elaine, the king, and the lady. They either climb in a barge to die or are laid out in a barge dead, like this is Venice, or what?
- I don't know. I never thought about it.
- Well, if you could think about it now, then please explain it to me. They all strike me as literary conceits. I don't know what to do with that.

Shauna has become absorbed in another book and has her own thoughts, her own concerns. The more she studies these tales, the less sympathy she feels for the knights, the king, even her daughter who seems to be siding with this courtly love story. In particular Shauna wonders about King Arthur's wound. It makes no sense at all to her, the confusing array of wounded kings and knights. Is King Arthur himself the Fisher King? There are often two kings, one who fishes and King Arthur himself and in any case, if searing is the solution to these wounds could he not have seared the wound with the staff set in the fire, with Excalibur? Even an ordinary sword might have served the purpose, and his sword had magic power. Perhaps he couldn't perform this operation on himself, so he could have had Sir Bedivere seal the wound with the blade rather than simply throw it back into the lake, to be taken back by the Lady of the Lake which makes no sense at all. What good is it to her if he is dead? And Guinevere, if she were to be killed or sent to the convent, depending on Arthur's judgment, at least she deserved some memento. The sword could have been sold to post her bail. But no one is thinking about her. The story turns on itself just as Excalibur is returned to the lake. The whole thing is a love story that is mostly about men, perhaps simply another homoerotic fantasy in which the women are mere props. Did the king simply never notice Guinevere's down-turned face, the lady's eyes rolling back in exasperation, trying to hide her face so that he would not see what was so plain? She needn't have tried to conceal anything; he wasn't looking.

Shauna is wondering about this when her daughter interrupts her thought, and instead of answering her daughter she raises her eyes, looking out the window, and sees how the sun is caught in the almost transparent gold leaf that is still clinging to a limb of the tree growing on the south side of the house. Her thoughts turn to the season, Shauna thinking that she had better finish in the garden.

## Chapter 12

Eliza comes downstairs with both arms hugging a stack of books so she has no hand to free her from her XXL white t-shirt that is caught between her knees. She breaks her fall, pushing through the kitchen door as she nearly trips again when her red rubber flip-flop catches on the doorjam. Outkast playing on her iPod, her eyes remain focused just beyond everything she passes on the way through the front hall. She sets the books down on the dining room table, a hip-hop-induced kinaesthetic world organized by the beat in her ears, as if living by acoustic Braille.

King Arthur knew this about his queen: she'd been unfaithful, so he condemned her to death and rushed off to war with his brothers and sons as if heroism will solve everything, or at least death will. Shauna has been rereading this history and now Eliza has bought another stack of books from Amazon, obscure second-hand texts. It's all available on the Internet but Eliza plunks herself down at the dining room table, spreading the books like ancient treasures across the broad wood surface, the first pages flipped back in her script and a collection of Tennyson's poems open to "The Lady of Shallot." Her hands touch the old paper as if it were fine linen. Shauna stands behind her in the kitchen door, watches her daughter settle down to work, and doesn't realize Eliza's aware of her presence until Eliza looks up from her book, twists around in her chair and breaks the silence.

Eliza chuckles to herself, regaining Shauna's attention, and then asks, as if it would explain a joke.

- And what do you think of courtly love, Mom?
- I don't think about it at all.
- Unrequited love is like a species of self-love, don't you think?
- I suppose . . .
- It's why these people are so stupid in love. There is so little input.
- Do you think that is why King Arthur appears so thick?
- No, I think he thought he had her, Guinevere, when he was being had himself. I don't even think Tennyson saw the point.
- I said that, Eliza. I told you that.
- See? And you think I never listen, but I do, Mom. What you say echoes in my head: Finish school, don't hitchhike. And someday I'll hear it echo and say to myself, 'Heh, I think I better get out of this stranger's car and go back to school.' Like it's my own idea and you'll never get any credit for it.
- And what does that have to do with courtly love?
- Nothing.
- With courtly love, isn't there that sense that no one else is there?
- I suppose so. It really is an affair with yourself. You're right.
- I never said that.
- I think you did, Mom

- Well, I'm not going to argue with you.
- Anyway, did you know that in medieval times, back then unrequited love was considered the superior form of love? I read that, that it was thought to be most like God's love for us, God expecting nothing in return, and knowing all along how awful we can be. Or like Jesus' love, Jesus getting nothing but grief and the cross.
- Hmm . . .
- Otherwise, there is that feeling that you're striking a deal: I'll love you if you'll love me.
- We're only human.
- Jesus was a vampire.
- Liza Bear . . .
- Google it.
- Eliza Bear.

So there they are, daughter and mother, reading. It is November. It is fine. Eliza turns back to her book and Shauna moves into the garden. Over the trees a flock of pigeons circle, the low sun coloring their underside pink to a glistening silver and warm grey so striking it takes Shauna's breath away and the thought, that were she to believe in reincarnation then if she wasn't a bird in her last life, then certainly she will be one in her next. But she doesn't believe in reincarnation.

Eliza sees the pigeons too, the flickering light that catches her eye when she looks up from her book, looks out the window to where her mother stands looking up.

Shauna recalls the words of a Brahmin, a man who wants to be so good so as not to be reborn at all, certainly not as a common thrush. She considers Augustine's advice: sin boldly and come back as a pigeon, if she can only think of a sin worth committing.

When Shauna comes back into the house through the kitchen Eliza slams her books shut and stacks them up with her script beneath the pile. She raises herself up to her full five feet tall, humming that song under her breath so softly Shauna cannot hear the lyrics

*“Start spreading the news, ta da, ta da . . .  
I’m leaving today . . .”*

She hums a few bars, as she has been over the last several days, adding another bar, then the lines, until it is running through Shauna’s head all the time as well. That could be the sin, Shauna smiles ruefully toward her daughter: Infanticide. It’s never too late.

This morning Shauna was planning on planting daffodils in the borders and crocus bulbs in the lawn, one of those perfect late autumn days in California where the earth feels cool, and she enjoys the cold and cramp as she curls her legs beneath her. Her stiff knees cracked, this new sound, her body talking back to her, a phenomena that coincided precisely with Liza Bear beginning to talk back in her early adolescence, and Shauna learned to ignore them both simultaneously, aware that to make too much of it only makes matters worse. She prepared the soil but now the day is almost done, and the bulbs remain in their net bags. She goes into the house, sticks her head into her office where Eliza sits at her desk, and she’s surprised to hear another voice. Ted’s voice, but of course that can’t be. Ted’s dead. It’s been weeks since Eliza’s had a visitor and indeed Eliza is alone at her desk. Shauna shakes off the odd sensation, takes a deep breath to produce a mother’s chirping sound as she recites aloud a variation on a poem her own mother had embroidered for her when Theo was a newborn, changing only a few words:

My bulbs can wait, can wait ’til tomorrow  
while ladies grow old we learn to our sorrow.  
I put down my work and you your lethargy.  
Come along, daughter, come shopping with me.

Eliza won’t come. She’s absorbed with something on her laptop and replies without even looking up.

- I’m working.

- What are you working on?
- The back story.
- But . . .
- Mother, you used to respect my focus.

Shauna is defeated with that line. She will head out to the store herself later on and moves toward the kitchen. Eliza stands up and leans out against the doorway to the office, asking Shauna politely, in an arresting tone,

- Mother, do you know anyplace I can get a copy of that Italian novel, the one Tennyson mentions? I’ve checked everywhere and I can’t find it. Not even in the universities in Italy, at least not the ones listed here.

She has indeed been cruising libraries on the Internet, her eyes fixed on the screen for hours at a time. Shauna has noticed.

- Eliza, I’ve followed up on all the sites Google offers. Honestly I have and I can’t find it either. Did you try the Central Library downtown?
- Of course. That’s where I started. They had that exhibition years ago . . .
- And UCLA?
- Yes, and USC. This is the information age. Right? An important work . . .
- Perhaps you’re misspelling it?
- Mother!
- I’m just saying,
- Please! Oh, never mind.

Shauna is embarrassed that she can't provide Eliza this book. She is an historian of sorts, and information is the brick and mortar in this history, imagination the lines, so that facts are no longer static but footings and arches. She should be able to retrieve a book. It is available in the world and she knows what she is looking for. She even has the title, but things change and the old are quickly buried. Now, knowing precisely what fact one is looking for is everything. But this Italian story is not a fact, and more than ever it seems that stories are elusive.

- Eliza, did you see the Montanari books? *Food is Culture*?
- Yes, well no. I looked it over. It's not what I'm looking for.
- Still . . .
- Still what?
- I'm still looking.

Eliza stares at her mother with equal parts pity and disdain. Shauna stares back, suddenly a bear ready to cuff the cub on the side of her head, when both shift posture in time.

- The book with all the recipes, Mother, that's great. Thanks.
- I didn't know that about the metal goblets but certainly the bowls of sweet-scented water for hand washing.
- Yeah. No wonder the plague spread like wild fire, but they tried. Should I . . . ? Oh, never mind?
- Should you what? Provide individual wine glasses for your guests instead of sharing a single chalice? Certainly, what with H1N1 . . .
- I haven't decided. Authenticity isn't mimicry but mimesis.
- What?

- But no utensils. We'll use spoons for broth and . . . Mom, I just need the novel. How are you doing on that?

Shauna can't find a copy of that Italian novel anywhere. She is a total bore in her daughter's eyes if she can't even tell her where to find a book. But it is lost. Lost. She comes over and puts her arms around her daughter's shoulders, as Eliza sits back down at Shauna's desk.

- Mom, I have no idea how to pronounce these foods. Blaw maungeres, brawne bruse, buet or bruet . . . Never mind how the fuck I prepare them.

Shauna sighs. She really should get back to work herself. She likes working in this office, in the comfort of her home office although it doesn't feel so much hers since Eliza has almost taken the room over lately. Shauna prefers to work at home, and the fact that she works well at home is not irrelevant to her humble success as both a real estate agent and historian. The way she sets about her work, sooner or later with any project, is to gather all the data just to finally set it aside, to sit quietly and wait for what she laughingly calls one Real Thought. No one would pay her for the Real Thought, but they do pay if it comes to them decorated with data, bound as a history project or as an offer on a house, the dream house.

Shauna notices that the way her daughter sets about her work is completely different, serendipitous, and certainly not according to Stanislavski either. She works at Shauna's computer writing the back story, creating what the screenwriter perhaps hinted at, but left out altogether. She makes up her character's favourite colour, a family history, anecdotes from her school days. Right now she sits at the computer expanding on the legend of *The Lady of Shalott*. The web, a tapestry, is woven by the lady, figures and dreams twice removed, giving linen flesh with the lady's needle. A stitch in time saves nine lives; she stops the bursting dam with a French knot. The lady is an arachnid, a female cliché, but this was Tennyson's idea. The lady weaves a web, a tapestry from the images reflected in the mirror, her art twice removed. In Eliza's story as she has told it to Shauna, the lady's weaving makes what is woven surely so. Even King Arthur's sword, Excalibur, secures its power through the lady's handiwork. The lady has sewn it in with its magic so long ago, the aging King Arthur foolishly loans it to Sir Lancelot, poor judgment considering the knight's designs on the king's wife. But it is not really the knight's design at all; it is hers, the lady's.

The lady is stitching a festival to be held out of doors with the golden thread of her autumn, a whirl of colour and light that plays off the tip of the sword. The lady's eyes get tired. She wonders: What else can I do to fill this long day? Should I weave a sudden shower and have the party-makers all hustle away? Oh no, let them play, but I must tend to the soil over here in the fields, prepare the ground for the fall planting. I do get so bored with that pale brown.

Eliza used to keep a pet spider she called Charlotte, of course, and the family all protected her web that spread across the north corner of our back porch. Charlotte had red stripes across her back, if Shauna remembers correctly but she's not sure that she does. Perhaps it's only a picture of a spider, a picture that looks like Charlotte, and that is what she remembers, not the live Charlotte at all. Still, she does remember something, something particular about Charlotte that is beyond appearance, even if Charlotte exists now only and completely as a figment of Shauna's imagination. It wasn't Shauna's pet spider; it was Eliza's, and she knows nothing about it she knows Ted, Theo and William cared enough to protect the web.

The lady and Charlotte have much in common; they are both weavers and at least for a season have both been objects of Eliza's focused energies. Not unlike the lady's tapestries, Charlotte's web defined certain social arrangements and borders. There she sat and waited, either under the eaves or in the very centre of her web. Eliza's whole family happily protected it, warning their friends not to disturb Charlotte's handiwork and livelihood. When they had a backyard barbecue that summer they warned the guests not to disturb the web. They didn't care what people thought, not as much as they cared about Charlotte. And after everyone had left, they checked the web and watched Charlotte feast on a fly that was lured into it by the smell of potato salad. Sometimes they wondered aloud to each other, why were they partial to Charlotte and not to the fly? Love goes where it will, Shauna told the kids which explains nothing.

Shauna pulls a sweater from the closet and pulls it over her head. She will try again to persuade Eliza to go out shopping with her. There, writing instead of furiously knitting, is her daughter. Such energy stills Shauna's fears that Eliza is slipping into depression, but that is a possibility she thinks she really ought to consider. Eliza has been knitting with fine wool that Shauna ordered for her from Newfoundland. The wool is hand dyed, and if she doesn't order quite enough the whole effect is ruined because the dye lots are each unique. Shauna is wearing a sweater Eliza had said she wanted to rip apart. Whoever knitted it used wool from different dye lots.

Its left sleeve is almost red, while the rest is a rich burgundy. Shauna feels like a knight, intruding, to rescue her daughter from her work.

- Isn't there a knight in those books of yours, darling, with a red sleeve like mine?
- Mother, you look ridiculous in that sweater. I wish you'd let me either fix it or throw it out.
- Fix it how? You told me just the other day the whole sweater had to be knit from wool with the same dye lot.
- I'll redesign the sleeve. But you're right. Simply toss it out.
- But your father bought it for me.
- So now who is being romantic?
- Why didn't someone try to rescue the lady?
- That's quite impossible, Mother. There is a curse.
- Where was her mother? What is the power of a curse compared to a mother's love?
- A curse is a curse, Mother.
- Come shopping.

Shauna brings the arm of the sweater up to her nose and breathes in the rich smell of lanolin, and Eliza raises her arm to hush her mother and then turns back to the keyboard, again furiously typing some text into the computer. Shauna knows better than to interrupt. She stands there watching for several minutes until Eliza slows up, finally resting her hands in her lap, and Shauna asks,

- Won't you please come shopping with me, Liza Bear? We must get groceries at least.



- Let's never leave the house, Mother. Surely we can have the groceries delivered. Let's just phone Pink Dot.

Eliza gets up from the laptop, leaving the screen glowing, and heads back into the dining room, to her books, trusting Shauna to save her work for her, Shauna supposes, rather than simply switching the computer off. Shauna sits down and reads the file name, A:\eliza\back story, then scrolls down as she reads the screen:

I am the Lady of Shalott  
often confused with Elaine of Astolat  
who died of love for Lancelot,  
though I did not seek, was not sought  
for love but in my tower stay  
all the night and all the day  
and see the world as shadow play  
upon the mirror. I weave and dream.

I am the Lady of Shalott  
I don't say much nor eat a lot.

But defy Tennyson's dream.  
His daughter not limited by the father's scheme  
of what she might be, which I have altered.  
His imagination did but I have not faltered  
til here, now, I speak and he is dead.  
To all the others, let it be said  
that I did not die first. No, it is not true,  
for revenge is the daughter's. I live in you.

Shauna startles, picks up the book that sits next to the keyboard, the source that she supposed her daughter had simply copied, Tennyson's own conclusion to Part I of his poem:

*Only reapers, reaping early  
In among the bearded barley,  
Hear a song that echoes cheerily  
From the river winding clearly,*

*Down to tower'd Camelot:  
And by the moon the reaper weary.  
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,  
Listening, whispers, 'Tis the fairy  
Lady of Shalott.'*

## **Part II**

*There she weaves by night and day  
A magic web with colours gay.  
She has heard a whisper say,  
A curse is on her if she stay  
To look down to Camelot.  
She knows not what the curse may be,  
And so she weaveth steadily,  
And little other care hath she,  
The Lady of Shalott.*

## Chapter 13

- Mother.

William can use that word as if it were a pointed knife. He stabs twice.

- Mother, neither of you are working and I am willing to take one day off work. This flight works perfectly, and it's discounted.

Shauna feels uneasy about taking the traditional trek home for Thanksgiving at all, home meaning her mother's home in upstate New York where the snow might be piled up already, like in a Christmas card, with the expense of it all, and bringing Theo back from England again two weeks later. Thanksgiving weekend flights get booked up, car rentals can be tricky and William wants the cheapest, best deal, God bless him. He sallies forth to secure discounted seats online.

- Some of us still have jobs. I'm already missing one day, and we probably wouldn't get into Manhattan for Eliza's party anyway, by the time we collected our luggage, rented the car and drove into the city. The traffic, my God, the night before Thanksgiving.

Eliza Bear quickly agrees to forgo spending Wednesday night in Manhattan, to fly into Syracuse, and punches her brother's shoulder.

- Fine by me. Chill, Will.

William began arranging everything well ahead of time, and remains cranky and insistent. He may still hold a grudge against her, Shauna speculates, for trying to sell the house, and needs to assert his precarious status as eldest child and financial boss in the family. And he certainly loves his grandma. He wants every holiday and family event to be observed, Thanksgiving the pinnacle of the American Family Tradition which he means to uphold. A trip to his grandmother's house is in order.

- Liza Bear, I thought you missed your friends from the academy.

Shauna expected Eliza to protest missing the pre-Santa Parade party. In the past she'd begged to go early so she could hang out near the Natural History Museum with her friends from the academy as Spongebob Squarepants and Pluto are inflated. Eliza's lack of enthusiasm surprises her, so Shauna argues Eliza's case for her and interjects:

- William, Eliza hardly ever sees her friends anymore, not here nor in New York. Why don't we fly into LaGuardia, spend Wednesday night in Manhattan and leave early in the morning.
- And spend Thanksgiving on the road? Some holiday.
- Mom, my friends and I are in touch all the time. Jackie facebook me every day, at least once a day. It gets annoying. And I've got work to do here. I'd rather stay home, to tell the truth. Why don't you two go without me.
- Surely Facebook isn't the same as hanging out with them in the park.
- Mother, Eliza said she doesn't want to do that, and it will be totally inconvenient. Why are you arguing with her?

- I just thought she must be lonely.
- I told you, I've got stuff I need to get done here.

William asks without even looking up at his sister

- Eliza, are you lonely?
- No.
- Good.

William is getting impatient to head back downtown and wants to book this flight.

- We lose most of the day on the way there.
- Eliza?
- Mom, why don't we all simply stay home. Have Thanksgiving here for a change.

Eliza turns her face away from her mother, hiding anything her eyes might give away. She gives nothing away, so Shauna leans over William's shoulder to peer into the computer screen, checking arrival times and discounts for car rentals as they get ready to book the tickets. It all seems so easy, while Eliza moves into the kitchen to brew a pot of tea for everyone.

He presses the 'print' symbol on the screen.

- Okay, we can have it all ways. Look at this. We can fly in on Wednesday and drive up from the City. It's no problem late Wednesday night. I just hope it doesn't snow.
- So you're missing work on Wednesday anyway. Why don't we go earlier and hang out in the city. Eliza can go be with her friends the whole evening, we can take in a show and stay in the city overnight? Book a hotel online there. There are all sorts of discounts. Try something in midtown. All her East Coast friends will be there.

- Mom, William's right. We'll spend most of Thanksgiving Day on the road and Grandma will have to prepare everything alone.

William taps more keys and begins to panic.

- It will be almost midnight if I can't get this direct flight. I think we should go for it.

Eliza sighs.

- I say we just stay home.

Thanksgiving. Of course, they had celebrated it with her mother most years recently, but there were many years in the past when they hadn't. It's a big deal for her mother and entirely possible this year of all years. She can't simply ignore that. And William has it all figured out, calculating the difference in costs plus tax should they fly into Syracuse. The emotional costs, what it is she feels inside her mother's house, is harder to calculate even if William knew the price she pays every visit, and the risk of travelling through a blizzard.

- Eliza has a point; maybe we should stay home.

William snaps his computer lid down. Shauna sighs. Eliza breathes a sigh of relief.

- Fine.

William begins packing up his laptop, growling. He will kiss his sister goodnight and his mother will walk him to the door.

- Goodnight.

Eliza checks her cell phone for messages, no missed calls, no phone messages, no new texts. She flips it closed.

## Chapter 14

The next morning Shauna wakes up to the radio talking about the weather though she insists Los Angeles doesn't have any weather, which explains the need to invent so much drama here, in the movies, in the news, to break up the monotony; it's all a rain dance. Shauna lays there awake and thinks she should start dating again. Maybe her daughter's strange morbidity is her own carried forward, because she refuses to carry it forward herself. It has been nearly four years since her husband died. Her husband has a name, a very common name. Her husband's name was Theodore; it still is Theodore; just because he is dead doesn't make him nameless. They called him Ted and named their second son after his father, and called him Theo. Two more different men never walked the planet.

*You never step into the same river twice.*

Who said that? Someone besides Shauna, with her passion for history, a passion for returning to the same river. Someone way before Christ, maybe before Abraham. Confucius? No, one of the Greeks. Shauna will look it up, will see who said it. Anyway, it appears to be the case.

Maybe that's why Eliza isn't interested in love; her mother never was, not really, therefore a bad role model. Shauna sighs and decides to get up now. She will go into the village, walk instead of drive. She needs the exercise. She needs to get out. She also needs bread and milk. There are vegetables from last week's shopping still fresh enough. Eliza hasn't eaten much, hardly anything really. Shauna should get fresh fruits and vegetables, but really all she needs at the store is bread and milk, and only because the

bread is dry and the milk has spoiled, Shauna admits. Neither she nor Eliza touched them. She will walk to the market. That must be Eliza bumping around in the kitchen. Maybe she can talk Eliza into walking with her to the market like they used to when Eliza was little. Shauna would hang her grocery bags on the back of the stroller and if the boys came they would bump along in front or behind her, but they seldom came; it was too much with the three of them in the market. Now she doesn't buy so much. She simply needs to remember the cloth sack so she doesn't have to deal with guilt about using plastic.

Shauna puts her feet down beside the bed just as she hears the back door open. Eliza has gone out, Shauna thinks with some relief. Eliza hasn't left the house in the last several days, possibly weeks. It might be three weeks she's been at her computer or texting with her ears plugged into her iPod. Surfing the net, never going anywhere. It was beginning to worry Shauna. But now she's going out. She said so last night, that she's going to the yarn store in Santa Monica. She's asked to borrow the car. She's opening the garage door. She's starting the car. She's driving down the driveway. Shauna will have to walk to the market after all if Eliza has the car. Eliza has finally gone out somewhere.

## Chapter 15

Eliza thought she might have to go out, go to the yarn store in Santa Monica. She thought she had no choice. She can get instructions online for knitting more complicated patterns than she already knows, but the art of tapestry seems illusive and the medieval tapestries she's seen at LACMA bear no resemblance to the cross stitched projects online that you make on plastic sheets of tiny squares, that remind her of her grandmother's toilet paper roll covers. There's an artist standing in front of an elaborate loom online, like the lady. This woman inspires her but describes the art of tapestry such that it obviously takes years to acquire it, and Eliza's only studying for the part. She can't invest this much time. Ah, if she were a real method actor she wouldn't hesitate. She wouldn't be taking up knitting again instead of tapestry. Why didn't she learn tapestry in high school? That might have proven useful, more useful than trigonometry certainly. Or at least how to surf the net more effectively, well enough that she could learn how to do tapestry online without having to travel to Sydney which is where the site originates, the site to which she was directed after an hour online trying to figure out how the Lady of Shallot was actually spending all those hours in the tower. She was weaving tapestry, not cross stitching toilet paper roll covers. It's indicated in the paintings what this entails, a large loom. After hours surfing the net Eliza wound up on the phone talking to this lady who owns the yarn store on Santa Monica Boulevard in Santa Monica. At least it's easy to remember. She's got a small loom, child's size really, but will show Eliza a thing or two about tapestry.

The only thing I got in my last year of high school was this idea of a social contract, Eliza muses. Like here in LA, it is all about traffic. There's this business about everyone driving on the right side of the road, and only crossing the lines to pass. It gets messy if someone breaks that contract but by and large people don't, or there would be body parts strewn around on the 10 Freeway and traffic tied up for hours. Traffic is always tied up and sometimes there are body parts but these aren't the body parts of rebels, which is why it's called 'an accident' and not 'a revolution.' For hundreds of miles driving every day people don't even veer more than maybe two feet—that's keeping within a margin of error less than 10% of the lane contract—but even that's not law abiding enough because that 10% or even 1% or .1% or .001%, given the millions of drivers driving hundreds of miles; it winds up to be a lot of accidents even if the city's total anarchists go along with this social contract most of the time and stay in their lane. Thank God Eliza doesn't have to go out to Santa Monica. Who knows what might happen. It's best not to risk it. Stay home.

Because sooner or later along comes someone who has a slight problem with depth perception, or like everyone who gets tired and tends to swerve, bumps are placed on the white lines to address people's disability due to congenital problems or sleepiness or drugs or hunger. Eliza hasn't had anything to eat yet this morning, not even a coffee. If she were to drive she might want to follow the social contract but perhaps she wouldn't be able to. Perhaps even she, or someone who's partially blind has to take the bus or maybe friends will arrange carpools. Once in a while someone tries to drive himself like that guy who drove into the Santa Monica Farmers Market, and actually everyone went nuts and several people died. How many? Eliza is curious and googles it—shit, that old man killed ten people. Hey yeah, we totally blame him. People assume he's crazy, or senile or heartless, and whatever, the social contract fails. Maybe he'll break the social contract, but who broke it first. She's thinking about Stanley, of course. She's always thinking about Stanley. Sure he's a freak but even freaks are freaky for a reason, she thinks. It was a joke, and she didn't get the joke, she realizes too late. Stanley was trying method acting. Because he's Latino he figures he'll always have parts staging robberies so he had asked her, how about I rob you? and she'd said, sure, why not? She doesn't remember saying it, but how else do you explain what happened? Him with that dumb hat they'd bought at the swap meet, pulled down over his face with holes for his eyes and nose, like she would not recognize his body and his voice, and the hat itself,

Dumb ass, she mutters to herself.

## Chapter 16

- Where did you go?
- No where.
- So what is that you've got there?
- Thread for the tapestry.
- Where did you get all that?
- I ordered it online. It arrived this morning.
- I thought you were going to that shop in Santa Monica.
- Changed my mind.
- I heard you go out.
- Well, I didn't it.
- But you don't do tapestry.
- But I'm learning.

- Do you want some lunch?
- No.
- I'm making tuna salad.
- You know I'm vegetarian.
- What does it matter to you if you don't eat meat if you don't eat anything anyway?
- I eat plenty.
- Tuna isn't meat.
- Meat is flesh and tuna is fish flesh. Duh.
- I mean it isn't farmed. Isn't that the issue? Cruelty to animals. Pollution.
- No, that's not my issue.
- Can I see the yarn you ordered?
- Thread. I ordered silk thread. It's up in my room.
- Can you get it and show me? I'm curious.
- Can I show you later?
- When did you learn tapestry?
- There are videos online. I've been learning online.
- Can I borrow your book on Tennyson?
- What does that have to do with anything, Mom?
- I just would like to read it. Why wouldn't I?

- For the same reason you're not interested in arachnids. Why would you be?
- I am interested in arachnids. Funny you should raise that. Remember Charlotte? I was just thinking about her the other day.
- Do you want that book as well?
- No.
- Just messing with you, Mom. Sure. I'll get it for you.

Shauna falls asleep that night with Eliza's book on her chest and she dreams about the electric razor she didn't get until after her twelfth birthday. Her mother had meant to pick it up, but on the evening before Shauna's birthday she realized she hadn't done so. She was alternating between this kind of rage and that kind of fear that she wouldn't maybe make it to the morning. She was insisting Shauna's eldest sister drive her into town, and her sister resisted.

- No, Mother. Lie down. I'm calling the doctor.
- No, don't call the doctor. I have to go into town. I have to have something for her birthday.
- Lie down, Mother.
- You must drive me. I shouldn't drive. I can't do this to her again.

Shauna wanted to scream out, perhaps she did scream out.

- Forget it. Forget my birthday!

And for the rest of her life she does try and often almost forgets her birthday. Last week she almost did, but Theo sent her a card and William some flowers. Eliza made her an elegant dinner. Nevertheless, Shauna has never owned an electric razor.



Her mother was hospitalized in the middle of the night, and the hair on Shauna's legs which was merely a soft light fuzz because she was still so young, grew longer as she moved through her teenage years until she discovered waxing.

Now she dreams of an old-fashioned electric razor with a long cord on Liza Bear's dresser so long it twists around Eliza's neck, and when Shauna rushes over to loosen it she cannot call her daughter's name.

Abruptly Shauna wakes up.

She stares up at the ceiling in the dark, frightened because she thinks maybe her daughter has been abducted by an alien razor, although she knows it is Guinevere who is abducted and someone else takes her place so perfectly that even her husband, King Arthur, doesn't recognize that this is not his wife. Maybe even her mother cannot know who is who, that it was not her daughter, and no one is dead and no one owns an electric razor with a cord so Shauna drifts back to sleep, confused as she pulls back the covers because there is no impostor, no Eliza, no one there at all under all those covers, and suddenly the quilts themselves dissolve and Shauna wakes up again, her shirt drenched with perspiration.

Fully awake, Shauna gets up and changes out of her wet nightgown, throwing on a robe. She moves into the living room, taking Eliza's book with her. She intends to finish it. She closes the living room window and plops herself prone on the sofa, the book falling on the floor next to her. A grimace crosses her face as she remembers when she was a little child and it was exactly like in the dream and she had wet her bed and how could she tell her mother this? Maybe it never happened but what she is remembering is the fear of shame, not the shame itself. She supposed she did wet her bed at least once, and now it is the top as well as the bottom sheet that it wet with her perspiration from these nightly sweats. Great. She sees the collection of Tennyson's poems that has fallen open on the floor, stares down at its dry leaves and finally allows herself to lay back and consider whether the story of the lady is about suicide.

The curse is unnamed but Shauna recognizes how it rings in Eliza's thoughts as familiar as church bells, so that she longs to play the part because she *is* playing the part. What is this longing where there ought to be revulsion? Shauna is revolted. Maybe it's like twins, a genetic fluke that skips a generation, there it is in the code, emergent, a desire for death that runs in their family as sure as diabetes and auburn hair. Shauna has never spoken to her daughter at length about her sorry family story, the tired old story. Liza Bear might have heard her aunts whispering, but she would not

have heard Shauna speak of it. Shauna has never spoken to anyone about it, has never asked her own mother why or how the attempts were made. She doesn't want to know about those deaths and near deaths. Maybe Eliza put it together for herself or learned something about it during one of their vacations back east. Perhaps the furniture told a story, a letter in a drawer, some pictures in a photo album.

Now Eliza's learning all the Arthurian legends to understand Tennyson's poem better. The legend of the Lady of Astolot is about unrequited love, the lady's for Lancelot, and the lady dies in her grief. Not so, the Lady of Shalott, Eliza insists. Grief has nothing to do with it. She dies furious while the lady of Astolot chases death, but both lay in a boat already in the arms of death. That is the cause of confusion, the similar names and both girls dead in a boat. The confusion is understandable, but consider the differences. Anyway, when Shauna asked Eliza if hers is a study of unrequited love, she looked at her mother with absolute disgust.

- Why, Mother, do you ask?
- Just curious.
- Is this your new theory, that I am suffering unrequited love. Oh, Pleeese . . .

That drawn out please, drawn all the way from her four-year-old precocious impatience, drawn like a trajectory rising in her adolescence until now 'please' is two syllables, the first 'pull', the second with a very long E and an S sound as sustained as a snake hissing. Oh, Liza Bear, grow up and go away.

Lancelot cannot requite the poor Lady Astolot's love so she dies of sorrow or perhaps it is anorexia, a hunger strike in love's labour dispute. Her last request is that she be laid out on a barge and sent down the Thames river, bedecked in her finery. Unlike the Lady of Shalott, the Lady of Astolot is aided by a loving father and an oarsman who steers her boat on its maiden voyage. Could this be the origin of the term 'maiden voyage,' Shauna wonders. From a window in their castle, King Arthur and Queen Guinevere spy the boat, and bid that it be brought to shore. They see the lovely dead lady with her note, proclaiming her sad love for a knight of their round table, Lord Lancelot, and the appalled queen admonishes Lancelot. Certainly he might have averted the tragedy had he given her

some token amount of attention. Lancelot protests that love does not answer to necessity or demand, but must spring freely from within. Okay, Lance, point well taken, but Elaine is dead and she died for love.

Mortality. Shauna considers it only when confronted with extreme physical pain, usually a physical disaster as when her daughter had a swollen abdomen that might have indicated cancer of the liver, or when Shauna broke her leg skiing and no one found her laying in that out-of-the-way place for over an hour where she feared no one would find her ever, holler as she might and she did. Or when her husband lay dying for a month. Especially then.

To quiet her anxiety she considers a bloodless life of immortal souls out there beyond time, where William, Theo and Eliza and she will blissfully cohabit with their father in space beyond time with St. Anthony and the Virgin Mary, and this makes her laugh because she does not believe in heaven. The most perplexing idea to her is reincarnate life wherein she won't look like herself, will be unattached to her history, yet somehow remain herself. Then there is also, of course, the notion of immortal resolution, the fountain of youth, so that she might stay exactly as she is forever and ever, intact and stuck. That too is a curse, not unlike the lady's. It is a dream that seems to have taken over when new plastic surgery techniques are reported on almost daily evening news, the body as art. If scientists can identify the chromosome that triggers aging and modify it, what can be said of mortality other than it is a weak gene that can be fixed. Any living being, however banal, can be genetically altered for immortal existence, meaning only that it might last a very long time. Ashes to ashes with something still left behind, some contingent other self that can free itself, and live.

The dream of immortality is reduced to merely stuff that lasts. Shauna sees it all the time in her business. When people are looking for a new home they are more often looking for a new life. Still, it is real estate and not even the land but stuff they ask for, and they buy it already installed. Grab this opportunity, the agent says, but it is not mere opportunity that her clients mean to purchase. The client may say they are moving because of a job or because they need more or less room. They don't speak the truth, though neither do they intend to lie. Shauna understands. They simply don't know their old or new lives by name.

- Mom, are you okay?

Eliza asks, looking over at Shauna whose book has remained open in her lap although she has not turned a page for, oh, perhaps half and a hour.

- I'm fine. Just thinking.
- Why are you sleeping in the living room?
- I couldn't sleep, so I came out here to read. I must have fallen asleep anyway.

Eliza checks her face in the full length mirror that stands in the hall between the kitchen and the bathroom, the morning sunlight catching the sheen of her hair. Shauna watches Eliza lean in toward the mirror and notices how it shows in her daughter's face, that really she is becoming rather too thin.

That night Shauna again dreams of the children's father looking at her and then Eliza with the eyes of a Gorgon. Those eyes have no deadly power against her because it is only his reflection she sees in her mirror, and yet she wakes up and again her nightgown is wet, cold and clammy and clinging to her chilled body. How can it get soaked through like this, with only her own perspiration? She has to change her clothes, and try to get back to sleep.

## Chapter 17

This morning Shauna is awake before the sun is up but the sky is lightening as she swings her foot down toward the cold floor, fishing for her slippers. She sits up on the side of the bed, leans over and picks up the volume of poetry. November is a miserable month to travel east, Shauna consoles herself; they've made the right decision to stay in Los Angeles for Thanksgiving. She remembers winter pleasures she can now hardly imagine as pleasurable: sledding, baking, Christmas shopping in the little downtown area. She can visit her mom in the summer, and never have to deal with cold weather again, the snowbelt that is upstate New York. Maybe she should try again to talk her mother into moving to LA, at least for the winters though she can't imagine her mother as one of the snow birds that populate the Farmers Market to sit under the green umbrellas by day and catch the free concerts Thursday and Friday evening.

When she hears William's car pull up the drive, she grabs her robe and heads for the kitchen. She will make a fresh pot of coffee, stir some pancake mix.

She doesn't pick up the book again, although she brought it into the kitchen thinking she might read it. She pours herself some juice. Eliza sits by the kitchen window, knitting. William comes in through the front door.

- Happy Thanksgiving, girls. Here's some of the fixings. I'll go out and get the rest. I don't need a hand, not that you offered.

He pecks Shauna on the cheek, then Eliza, and then he's gone again. Shauna sniffs the air.

- Is that coffee I smell? Oh dear, how long have you been up? I wanted to surprise you and have breakfast on the table.
- That would have been a surprise.
- As if I never fed you breakfast.

She watches Willie through the kitchen window pull two brown paper bags of groceries from Trader Joe's out of the back of his new little Fit, foodstuffs for the feast and the ingredients for Eliza's gingerbread houses. He kicks the car door shut behind him, securing the latch with his hip, then trudges up the short distance from the drive, his arms loaded, pleased with himself as he comes through the kitchen door. He sets down his packages and looks at his watch.

- For the first time since I moved downtown, there was no traffic. What a treat. I took Sunset and enjoyed absolutely clear sailing.
- When did you leave?
- Nine-thirty. What have you got there, Eliza?
- Coffee. I told you there's more there on the counter.

Shauna digs through the refrigerator for salsa and salad to have with her eggs and taco chips. She's developed a bad habit, huevos rancheros.

- Let me make you some scrambled eggs, Eliza.
- Maybe later, Mom. I'm not really hungry yet. Besides, William's going to want to take over the kitchen.
- I wouldn't mind some huevos rancheros.
- Why don't you eat some breakfast, honey?

- I just had some toast.

Her mother sets a mug of coffee down next to Eliza. William pulls a chair up across from his sister and stares at the bulk of knitting beneath her clicking needles. Shauna notes her progress on this project; obviously Eliza was knitting far into the night. Eliza sets her knitting down next to Shauna's book on the table and William shakes his head and asks his sister,

- Eliza, have you thought maybe you could get a day job?
- That worked well the last time I tried it. Do you think the café manager will give me a reference?

William ignores the sarcasm.

- Leave your sister alone, William. It's a holiday.
- Maybe Monday. Maybe Monday I'll apply at a temp agency. Did you get the ginger for the houses?
- Surely mom has ginger.
- I told you we didn't.

Eliza seems seriously agitated.

- I'm just fucking with you. I got the ginger. Everything on your list.

Eliza goes over to the brown bags William left there on the floor and lifts them up onto the counter. Shauna doesn't want them changing the subject.

- Eliza doesn't need a job; she needs an education. Would you like to go back to school because I was talking to Alison who was speaking with those women who play bridge together, and they were saying that Santa Monica takes young people and you don't have to have finished high school. You merely have to take

this test. And they've had famous alumni. Monica Lewinski for instance.

Eliza leans over and kisses her mom as she raises the bottle of powdered ginger in triumph.

- Mom, I suck at tests.
- It's simply a placement test.
- There's no test I can't fail.

So Liza Bear won't even think about it. William goes back out to the car and comes in with more food and the morning sun falls onto Eliza's book that lays open as Eliza leaves the kitchen to head to the bathroom.

*Elaine the fair, Elaine the loveable  
Elaine, the lily maid of Astolat,  
High in her chamber up a tower to the east  
Guarded the sacred shield of Lancelot;  
Which first she places where morning's earliest ray  
Might strike it, and awake her with the gleam;*  
(*Idylls of the King, Tennyson*)

It has to be love gone bad. It has to be a failed love affair that would leave her daughter so tirelessly indolent.

William comes back with another bag of vegetables and one more brown bag from Trader Joe's. He sets it down on the kitchen floor and calls to Eliza in the bathroom,

- Really, I did get all the stuff on your list, sis. But they have these houses already baked that you only have to decorate. I bought one of those.

Eliza calls through the bathroom door.

- Oh for God's sake. Well, thanks.

She and William acting so agreeably vexes Shauna; perhaps another coffee will help. She looks over at her son who is banging around in her kitchen cupboards.

- Wait 'til you see what I've brought for the stuffing, Mom. And I've got Eliza's Tofurkey. I can't believe I'm cooking tofu for Thanksgiving. A brother's love . . .

She knows her children have planned the whole holiday, not just today's menu but right through Christmas, without her consent. Granted, she never objected, but neither had she agreed. She might have been able to muster up some resistance, but she hadn't given it a thought before the three had everything arranged by email. They never agree with each other about anything, except this, from the Thanksgiving menu to Theo's arrival time. He'll be flying in from England a week before Christmas and staying through King's Night. Maybe Shauna's mother will come. That's nearly a month away, but William wants to make sure they get a good deal on their airfares.

William is still banging around while Shauna folds the newspaper up and picks up her copy of Tennyson's poems, and takes it into the living room to escape from her children's baking enthusiasm.

*And moving thro' a mirror clear  
That hangs before her all the year,  
Shadows of the world appear.  
There she sees the highway near  
    Winding down to Camelot:  
There the river eddy whirls,  
And there the surly village-churls,  
And the red cloaks of market girls  
    Pass onward from Shalott.*

Merely a fleeting thought, the mirror a precursor to the picture of Dorian Grey. It holds the lady's reflection and all she sees of the world like a jealous lover, the mirror itself the egoist, not the girl staring into mirror but the mirror, for the curse is real and the girl is cursed—she does not curse herself. William sticks his head around the corner to reassure her.

- Don't worry, Mom. I've got a real turkey for us. Fresh turkey from the market. Downtown. It's great being right there.
- I wasn't worried.

Indeed, William fails to drag Shauna out of her revelry. When someone dies in a Jewish family they cover the mirrors. Shauna visited her friend from work, Esther, whose mother died and who explained their custom, that the mirrors are covered so the mourners won't feel badly about their appearance for the eight days of the shiva, and also the covered mirrors let the spirit escape. This morning Shauna would like to cover the mirrors. The whole house is infested with memories. It's getting like her mother's house; memory there is palpable in things, where the *thingness* of everything is marked with memory so strongly that it's surprising anyone actually still lives there, coming and going. It's far worse at her mother's house. Her mother and sisters and even her own children come and go, always returning to the house. Her sisters, Alicia and Hilde, come often but seldom are they there together. The three daughters plan their trips so that one looks in on their mother every few months, to restock her cupboards, to make sure the house gets cleaned, to talk to her doctor if necessary. Each sister goes for her own reasons as well, but that is never discussed as they make their plans, as they make their way. It is a game they play. Remember? Yes, they remember. That is the point.

It's certainly time Shauna goes to visit her mother if they're not spending the holiday with her, to brave the weather and take her turn looking in on her mother. In any case, she'll send her sisters some money for groceries and whatever. Eliza comes, William right behind her, and grabs the remote.

- I'm going to check what time the parade starts.
- It's already started, silly. 9 a.m. Eastern Standard; 6 a.m. Pacific Time.
- Santa's coming to town.
- You sound like Grandma.
- You say that like it's a bad thing. I aspire to be like Grandma.

Her kids love their grandma, barely know their other relatives.

- Never mind.

Eliza clicks off the volume and heads back to the kitchen, William looking at the silent screen. He stares at his mother as if he has a thought not worth pursuing, then returns to this kitchen right behind Eliza.

Shauna tried to keep the kids in touch with their relatives. Ted had no siblings, and his father died shortly after the accident. Shauna's sister Hildie lives outside Chicago, and it is most difficult for her, she claims, to make the visits to their home town twice or thrice a year. Shauna hasn't seen her in four years. Hildie usually flies into Syracuse and rents a car. The drive from Chicago is too long and her husband hates to travel, so she flies in alone and drives up to Oswego, the trip taking at least eight hours door-to-door, as they all know well because she has told them so often. Her husband earns plenty of money as a surgeon, and she is a rather successful art dealer so it is never the cost she mentions, rather it is the time. She has to travel long distances because of her work, and sometimes she can piggyback a visit with her mother onto a necessary business trip to New York. Those times she only complains about the drive and sometimes the weather, that it rained or snowed or the air conditioner or the heater didn't work on the car rental so it was horribly hot or cold. She is the one with the chest of silver flatware.

Alicia lives much closer, in Albany, so she takes care of most things, Ginnie's money and health insurance and any major repairs to the house. She is the one to whom Hildie and Shauna suggested the house should be sold, and even though Hildie is the most aggressive and Shauna is an agent, it is Alicia's response to the suggestion that is given the most weight. She strenuously resisted and in time they agreed with her; they must keep the house. Their mother doesn't want to be moved. She won't be moved. Her memory is hinged to that house, as creaky as the doors are hinged to their frames. One ought not to dislodge either, so the old home remains their mother's lodging. For the daughters and for their children, it is a box of memories. They try most to remember the rare soft moments but sometimes they go too far. Thought. Shock. Stop. It's just a game, remember. Remember the rules.

Remember the things remembered. That's all they really want to play, and perhaps some photos will help, a few chemicals on paper or under the skin. The rules are simple. Always return to the house.

After Shauna's husband died she had returned to her mother's house with the kids, and when they'd arrived her mother had removed their wedding photo from the front entry hall. When Shauna questioned her about it, her mother offered an explanation: so as not to remind the children. As if the square of faded wall paper where their wedding photo had hung all those years, the nail head still showing, as if a bare spot wouldn't remind them. Shauna hates realism even more than she hates romantic art.

On that visit and every visit after that Ginnie took to feeding the kids with wild abandon, finding their favourite foods, mostly desserts but experimenting with Tex-Mex and recipes that *Sunset* magazine and *Family Circle* referred to as California cuisine, travelling great distances to find fresh strawberries and kiwi fruit if they weren't to be had in the country market or from the supermarket in town, cooking up and serving these foods with some flair, even if the kids remained in front of the television during the meal. Their grandmother permitted this, although Shauna never had. Ginnie would say,

- Oh, let them finish their show. Children, I've got fried chicken and scalloped potatoes. Are you hungry now or can you wait?
- Oh grandma potatoes! I can't wait.

William will no doubt be making grandma potatoes for Thanksgiving dinner in lieu of traditional mashed.

Ginnie can't drive anymore except in daytime and only if the weather is totally clear, so shopping is becoming a problem. And she loses everything. So the girls suspect Alzheimer's. If she sets something down now she might as well throw it out, for all the likelihood that she'll find it again, she tells the children. The last time they visited Shauna noticed all her mother's silverware had gone missing, piece by piece lost. The silverware drawer in her mother's house now only holds three pieces of silver, the serving spoons with heavy handles glitter cool white metal and, Shauna remembers this, the cake knife. Every birthday, wedding, christening, for every party there was the silver, now reduced to three pieces. What has happened to the rest, Shauna asked Ginnie who didn't seem to understand the question, and then remembered.

- The silver chest was given to Hildie.

William and Eliza spend most of the morning with the gingerbread houses, William supervising the baking turkey and Eliza the tofurky, gingerbread houses, the small screen t.v. on in the kitchen though they only glance at the Macy's parade.

## Chapter 18

After dinner they will pack one gingerbread house in popcorn to send through the mail. It takes some rummaging for the box. They will be sending the best house to Theo in England, the best house, along with a printout for his ticket back home for Christmas. His house isn't the biggest but certainly the most intricate, its roof made of colourful candy shingles and the whole roof can be lifted up to expose a candy and marzipan family scene inside. There is even a cat by a fire place. For extra strength William has attached the house to a cookie base with chocolate cobblestones that he carefully laid out. William and Eliza enclose one of Theo's favourite children's books that they found in the attic, *The Stupids Step Out*, in the box. Eliza is sending another house to a friend in New York later.

They call their grandma before William leaves and, given the time difference, just as she's going to bed. They use William's cell and put it on speaker phone which completely confuses Ginnie on the other end until William and Eliza curl up laughing and Shauna retreats to the other room. When they hang up Shauna helps William pack up some leftovers, the utensils he brought and a house Eliza decorated for him. She walks him to the car, and Shauna broaches the subject, out of Eliza's earshot.

- Did you notice, William, if Eliza ate anything all day?
- All we did was eat.

- All you did. All I did. I'm simply asking, did you see her eat?
- Thanksgiving dinner . . .
- She ate salad.
- That's something. And when we were making all those cookies?
- She never ate a single candy. She washed her hands rather than lick her fingers.
- She drank orange juice this morning. I saw her.
- Look at her, William. She's getting very thin.
- It's not like I can't see her.

Climbing into the car William looks straight up at his mother.

- Mom, she's fine.

Once William is on the road back to his loft downtown Eliza ponders aloud her grandmother's suggestion that she could do a year at Oswego's community college rather than finish high school, and then transfer to SUNY.

- She suggested what?
- It's an idea, Mother.
- What an idea! And your auditions?
- I'd take a year off. Jodi Foster took four years off. She went to Harvard. Shit, maybe I could get into NYU.
- Why NYU?
- Chill, Mom. It's just an idea.

- Do as you please.
- It's just that Grandma misses us. We should visit her more often.
- Maybe we should go to Oswego for Christmas rather than bringing her all this way.
- No, Mother. The Christmas plans are in place. Theo and I are planning a huge celebration here, all our friends, with a Mummings Play and all.

Perhaps the children are right, Shauna considers as she enters into the quiet of the house that seems to embrace her. Perhaps they should visit in Oswego more frequently. In between visits, Shauna's idea of her mother gets so big sometimes, she's not the shrunken woman sitting in the chair smoking cigarettes. Shauna in fact feels herself shrunken, knee high to her mother and hugging her mother's knee in the produce section of the supermarket, too big, her mom says, to ride in the grocery cart. She catches her reflection in the hall mirror. Yes, certainly too old to ride.



## Chapter 19

Eliza prints out versions of the Mummers play that cover the floor like fresh fallen snow. She plans that she and her friends will perform the cycle of plays, trite old pieces, and Shauna wonders if it's not almost a séance Eliza's planning. Shauna reads the play as she picks up the pages strewn on the carpet:

*1. When righteous Joseph wedded was,  
Unto a virtuous/virgin maid,  
A glorious angel from heaven came,  
Unto that virtuous/virgin maid,  
Unto that virtuous/virgin maid.*

*2. O mortal man remember well,  
When Christ our lord was born,  
He was crucified betwixt two thieves  
and crown'd with the thorn,  
And crown'd with the thorn.*

*3. O mortal man remember well,  
When Christ died on the rood,  
'Twas for our sins and wicked ways,  
Christ shed his precious blood,  
Christ shed his precious blood.*

*4. O mortal man remember well,  
When Christ was wrapped in clay,  
He was taken to a sepulchre,  
where no man ever lay,  
Where no man ever lay.*

*5. God bless the mistress of this house,  
With gold allchain round her breast,  
Where e'er her body sleeps or wakes,  
Lord send her soul to rest.*

*6. God bless the master of this house,  
With happiness beside,  
Where e'er his body rides or walks,  
Lord Jesus be his guide.*

*7. God bless your house, your children too,  
Your cattle and your store,  
The Lord increase you day by day,  
And send/give you more and more.*

Eliza never asks Shauna to return the books her mother had borrowed for her from the university, the Tennyson anthology and the collection on the King Arthur stories. She pours over a cookbook Shauna found, *Pleyn Delit; medieval cooking for modern cooks*. She begins sewing costumes copying medieval folk dramas, reads everything she can get her hands on about the Mummer's play.

Eliza says she will do all the Christmas cooking and preparations if Shauna simply does the shopping, which proves anything but simple. The cubebs and galingale can only be found in Indonesian shops, and there they are called laos, Shauna learns after many inquiries. The Grains of Paradise that several recipes call for are known now as maniquette, but cardamon is a good substitute. This knowledge doesn't come easy. Almonds can be bought in bulk and Eliza tests the recipes for *emeles* (almond cakes) and *gingerbrede* for the *subtlety*, desserts in medieval English high cuisine. Eliza surfs the internet and finds several recipes for meat and sauces and tests them. Shauna finds this odd; Lizza Bear does not eat meat.

- You'll see, mother. It will be awesome.
- Is Paul involved?
- If he's in town.
- Tom?
- I think so.
- And Stanley?
- Mom!

The shops and streets fill with shoppers and Eliza will have none of that. She sits studying at her computer, her baking in the oven. Sometimes she looks up only to pick up her knitting or to roll some more pastry, still with ear phones for her iPod. She and Shauna are like shadows to each other. She used to have such good friends in town and especially at this time of year she filled the house with her friends. Shauna asks and Eliza reassures her mother,

- That will be Christmas.

Last year the group of friends were here making paper maché masks for a play they were doing in their drama class. Huge elaborate masks. They spent days shredding newspapers, mixing flour pastes, shaping, painting. They took over the kitchen and then the dining room and soon the whole first floor was a workshop. Shauna didn't mind. It was as if they were children again, giggling whimsy and mischief. At one point they started whipping the pasted strips at one another and Shauna had to scold them or repaper the walls. But now what Shauna would give for them to come back, for those friends to come back and take her daughter out of herself. Eliza labours alone. She is gathering up old clothing, sewing costumes for her Mummers play in between cooking chores. She recites rhymes for the Mummers play.

*And if there be any Man who before me stand  
Bring him in and I'll cut him down  
With sword in hand!*

It is four in the afternoon. Shauna has walked into the kitchen to find Eliza there between her books and her yarn. Shauna reminds her,

- You haven't had anything to eat today. I'm making some tea. Will you be having some?
- No, thank you.
- Would you like some tea and crumpets? Is that authentic enough for you?
- Actually, the English in medieval times drank ale day and night. Tea didn't enter the English cuisine until the advent of their colonial project. They began trading tea for money and power. Up until then they were probably drunk the whole fucking time.
- Good on them. There's butter and some very nice jam in here. I got it at the market. With no preservatives. Not even sugar.
- No, thank you.
- Some biscuits? Some milk in the tea?
- Mother, I'm working.
- Liza Bear, you've got to eat something.
- Mother, you're always . . .
- I'm sorry.
- Never mind. It's okay. I mean, I'm okay.
- But obviously you're not.

- I'm fine, mother.

And then Eliza hums a few bars of the play but Shauna cannot actually make out what it is she's humming.

It must go back further than this, when their lives came unstuck, and that is not the way it happened, in the passive voice. They detached their lives, Shauna acknowledges. She troubles it as one does a hole one notices in a tooth, a small cavity where perhaps a filling has cracked. It doesn't yet chafe but one's tongue constantly plays against the annoying indentation. Shauna plays out on scene constantly in her mind. A generous and perceptive principal at Eliza's school had noticed certain things. He was polite enough not to allude to *circumstances* directly. He looked the other way when Shauna spilled coffee on the staff room table where they were meeting, and opened his mouth to speak. This was unusual, that she would spill the coffee since they were already seated, and unusual that he would open his mouth to speak first because he was, after all, the Strong Silent Type, especially when he was dealing with mothers. But he studiously had not noticed the coffee spill as Shauna grabbed a few napkins to wipe it up. Something had happened, not to the coffee but *under these circumstances*. The circumstances must be Eliza's dad's death, were all his fantasy, of no substance, because in fact nothing else has happened. Nothing had happened in a very long time. The only change was that Eliza was no longer attending school regularly. She had taken a part that meant she would miss the better part of her term in school, although tutors had been arranged and Shauna would provide supervision. Shauna was also to provide the requisite amount of parental indignation, that no-child-of-mine-is-dropping-out-of-high-school, to ensure that Eliza would be fine.

It is an opportunity for Eliza that should not be missed; that was exactly the way her high school guidance counsellor put it. This was precisely a year ago. The school counsellor, several years younger than Shauna, had set up a meeting earlier and had spoken with a kind of presumed wisdom that only the truly ignorant can muster, Shauna thought later. It is the kind of ignorance that requires one to dye one's hair purple using only natural dyes, so that even though it looks most unnatural it does not pollute the environment. Hers is the kind of ignorance that sports the all-black wardrobe of a mortician or professional artist that is meant to impress young people but did not impress Shauna. This woman sat across from Shauna on a comfortably padded chair, Shauna on the couch, lower

down, and she said that Shauna shouldn't worry. She said that Eliza was exceptional. She pointed out that Eliza was talented and ambitious beyond her years and, most important, that she was very sensitive. The hennaed purple head bobbed a bit as she spoke about Eliza's sensitivity. The bobbing was for emphasis, in case Shauna hadn't recognized this quality in her daughter, and might treat what is extraordinary as ordinary. They should do nothing to cripple her career. Whose career? Shauna had asked. And what would be the academic consequences of this particularly sensitive response to her daughter's particular sensitivity, and Henna informed her that Eliza had accumulated credits that were sufficient that if she finished just two courses by correspondence, then she would not even lose her year. She could still graduate with her classmates.

Shauna frets constantly about the decisions they made and could yet make about Eliza's schooling perhaps, she recognizes, because is the only element in the present situation she feels she might have done, might still do differently; the only element she has any control over. It is not Shauna's fault Eliza left school; they both consulted the experts who were of one mind. Had Eliza Bear already stopped eating, Shauna would not have made the mistake of allowing them to come unstuck, first from Eliza's institutional life and then Shauna from hers. School was the skin they needed that seemed to have peeled away, first for Eliza, then Shauna. They shed this skin.

But it isn't skin, the red brick shell of the school house, a hard little shell. They had been more like hermit crabs when it came to schools, scurrying from one to another as Eliza grew and the shells became too small. Then last winter, when they had scurried away from the old worn public arts school shell and didn't find another fast enough they lay in the sand, vulnerable and exposed. This is what the sensitive principal had noticed in his meeting with Shauna. Eliza had to be withdrawn. It was an administrative necessity, government regulations. The part of the hermit crab's body that is hidden in the shell is a red fleshy protrusion resembling a flaccid penis. But of course, neither Eliza nor her mother had a penis, so this vulnerability was something altogether different.

- Where can I buy some venison, Mother?
- Venison meat? I don't know, dear. I think you have to hunt for it, shoot your own.

- Surely someone sells it.
- I don't think so, dear. Pardon the pun, deer/dear. I mean, if you intend to shoot Bambi . . .
- Really, Mother.
- What do you want it for?

Eliza opens her laptop and surfs the net for an authority.

- For Christmas dinner. It would be perfect.
- Eating Bambi for Christmas doesn't strike me as perfect.
- Mother, at least it's not factory farmed.
- But you don't eat meat.
- According to you I don't eat anything. I don't mind cooking it. Do we know any hunters?
- I don't know any.
- Maybe William does. Maybe he can get some from the market.
- You can ask.
- If not venison, how about lamb? Or maybe both. And wild turkey. All the sites online say that in the medieval feasts they served several game roasts.
- Several?
- Mother, we're going to have like a zillion guests. All Theo's friends, and mine. And William will at least come and he's such a pig. Not just on Christmas day, but after the Mummer's play. You know there are twelve days of Christmas. Chill, Mother.

I've got most of the costumes already, and I'm doing all the cooking.

- You have done so much cooking already, Eliza. The freezer is almost full.
- It is a lot of work.
- It certainly is.
- I like it, Mother. But listen to this. Augustine of Trent suggests we abstain from fruit and raw vegetables, 'eat no leguminous plants when under the domination of Saturn that rules melancholia.' That's like 1336, about the same time isn't it? And it's also in the Duke of Berry's prayer book. *Tres Riches Heures*. Maybe speaking French will come in handy after all. Do you think you can get me this book from the library?

Shauna recognizes some real advantages in this medieval Christmas. For one thing, they can have a large party and there will be no dishes to wash. People eat off large slabs of bread, planks, mostly laden with meat and sauces. That might help Eliza chunk up a bit, get her off this vegetarian kick perhaps. But it will be work. Eliza reassures her mother.

- I can do this. I will arrange everything.
- Will you eat the meat?
- Mother, it's not a problem. I will have the bread and ale. It will be fun. You'll see. You just do the shopping. You and William. I'll divide the list up so you won't have to buy so much.

Okay, they can make this work. At least Eliza will eat something. William is less enthusiastic as they discuss their plans over the phone. He wants the traditions observed in the traditional way, with turkey and all the fixings, but he is appeased with the promise of a roast turkey instead of a pheasant, and he thinks he might be able to find some venison.

- Put Eliza on the phone and give us some privacy, Mother.

The children whisper secrets into their respective phone receivers and Shauna makes her exit toward her bedroom. It will be a wonderful feast.

This is how it is all through the four weeks leading up to Christmas. Eliza, either cooking or knitting, sometimes knitting in the kitchen while she waits for something that is cooking in the oven. Christmas has always been Liza Bear's season. Now she bakes all these pastries but she eats not a thing.

- What are you doing, Liza Bear?
- Making lasagna for the night Theo arrives. It keeps well in the freezer. He complains in all his emails about tasteless English food.
- Did you have any yourself? Eliza, you must eat something.
- Mother, please.

*Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,  
An abbot on an ambling pad,  
Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,  
Or long-hair'd page in crimson clad,  
Goes by to tower'd Camelot;  
And sometimes thro' the mirror blue  
The knights come riding two and two:  
She hath no loyal knight and true,  
The Lady of Shalott.*

## Chapter 20

Now in mid-December her friends start arriving back in town, Calvin and Jennifer from Berkeley, Maggie from Stanford, Randy from NYU. He has given up music, is considering landscape architecture. They will come by in the evenings and eat all Eliza's baking. Shauna knows this because she is allowed to look over Eliza's shoulder as Eliza creates this medieval fantasy in Second Life, a program she's downloaded, a VR world she's creating.

- VR, mom. Virtual reality. You know . . .

Now Shauna has her own avatar in the King Arthur's Castle meeting space online. She has flown above the mountain, stared down at the bridge before the castle, landing above a rushing stream thundering life-like in the canyon. As she entered the castle, King Arthur knelt down to greet her, a perfect gentleman. Eliza spent Linden dollars to purchase whatever she was unable to create and the kingdom surprises Shauna with its authentic touches: King Authur's shield, helmet and boots as he strikes a kneeling pose. Shauna remains a ghostly presence there because, having once created the avatar with Eliza's help, she's never been able to re-enter on her own. She tries again now, again in vain, bounced out of the castle into the thoroughly unimaginative Grid Status Reports page.

Eliza and her friends share music they've downloaded, some of it their own compositions, sampling the recordings of ancient instruments Eliza posted on her Facebook page. She has baked pies, mincemeat tarts, and

shortbread cookies. She has baked more gingerbread, sculpted figures from her book to bake the *rampaunt perre*. Her favourite snacks are the brie tarts she's prepared for Shauna to taste, though Shauna isn't sure Eliza has so much as touched them to her own tongue.

Shauna shops for Eliza's ingredients, anxious that the candied fruit decorations will lend an air of authenticity to the castle motif when their California bungalow finally fills with people and music and the smells of Eliza's baking. Shauna is relieved by the activity—that there is activity—but soon grows weary, retiring to her room to give Eliza her privacy as she whispers into her cell phone, making plans with her friends for when they arrive: Who is sleeping with whom? Teresa, she learns, drank so much throughout the whole term she failed all her exams.

Their avatars have names in Second Life and it seems everyone gets their real names and their avatars' names confused so that it sounds to Shauna as she eavesdrops like one of those key parties she remembers her parents laughing about in the sixties. She was eavesdropping even back then. Eliza puts her cell on speaker phone, so now Shauna can hear everyone laughing that secret-keepers' laugh as they divulged their secrets, and she behind the door truly keeping it all secret, unable to laugh or she will give herself away.

There is a quiet pleasure in listening to her daughter, and in looking over her shoulder sometimes as she decorates the castle in Second Life. A temple of silence compared to the mayhem at the Grove mall and Farmers Market, though Shauna misses the mayhem and canned holiday music of Christmases past. When she does go out she notices how the recession takes its toll on the commercial aspects of the holidays at the Beverly Center and Macy's but the Grove mall with its giant live fir tree and the fountain sprays keep rhythm and dance to the music, these work their magic on Shauna as she heads into Nordstom's.

Three days before Christmas they get a call, *the* call from Shauna's sister, Hilde.

- Is everything alright?
- No, everything is certainly not alright. Mom had what appears to be a stroke, or perhaps it was the fall. They are unsure if she slipped on the ice—those damn stairs—or she had a stroke and hit her head on the stairs as she collapsed . . . Nothing is sure.

She's not conscious; the prognosis isn't good . . . They've got her stable now. You better come now. You better come right away. Maybe Theo can meet you here. Of course. Simply rent a car from the airport. Shit, no, I can't arrange anything. I'm at the hospital. I'll stay until you come. They have something like a pull-out. Yes, come. Yes, bring the children. Please, Shauna, don't ask so many questions.

Her sister breaks down. She's crying and Shauna feels badly; of course; she shouldn't ask questions. Did she ask any questions? Her mind tumbles over all her questions but they stop at the doorway that is her mouth. She flips the phone shut and sets the phone down

- Eliza!

Eliza is already standing at the door.

- Eliza, your grandma.
- How bad is it?
- It sounds terrible. I think I have to go.
- Do you want me to come?
- Do you want to come?
- Of course I want to come, but I've got this cold. I don't think they'll let me on a plane.
- How could you possibly have caught a cold. You never go out.
- What if it's the flu? And what if Grandma catches it from me. Old people can die of the flu. I could kill her!
- People your age are dying from this flu, but how could you have caught the flu?

- Maybe from you. Maybe you've tracked in a virus on your shoes, Mother. Did you remember to wipe your feet when you came in the other day?
- Don't be ridiculous.
- Who's being ridiculous? I have a cold and you're arguing it's not possible. I'm taking care of it. I'm taking garlic and ginger tea, but I don't think they'll let me on a plane with all the fears of a pandemic. I heard on the news . . .
- I think Willie will want to go.
- And Theo? He hasn't left England yet has he?
- I'm not sure . . . .
- Mom, I've got to see Theo. If he meets you there he might not be able to come here later.
- Let me phone Willie.

So this is how the lady celebrates Christmas: Eliza has almost everything prepared the day before in Second Life, the castle in the glen, the mirror through which she watches her friends beyond the fields, a woodland area that opens up onto a meadow. Now that it is Christmas Eve the oven is on constantly. She has ready the six dishes for the first course: brawn (pork roast) with capon pastries, roast goose and chicken with side dishes of creamed leaks, vegetable-fruit chutney, fried beans. A disgusting black sauce is made of the poultry's ground livers, anise, and dripping thickened with breadcrumbs vinegar. The second course will be just as grand, pudding and dumplings, and more roasts, lamb, pigeons and more pastries. Cheese, egg and lemon soup for the vegetarians. And the elaborate centrepiece took the most time to prepare, the chastettes, a pastry castle baked in the round with a huge pork pie for the main tower and four smaller towers filled with almond cream, custards and ground fruit.

On the other side of the continent Theo arrives at Laguardia, getting in the day before Christmas. He catches the train to travel upstate, William

picks him up at the station, and they proceed directly to the hospital. Their grandma has remained barely conscious, but Theo takes her hand as soon as he enters her hospital room and she seems to faintly smile. He looks up and kisses his mother on the cheek as she embraces him. Shauna is struck by how much Theo has changed, his heart broken and his beard grown long in these last few months; well really it's been more than half a year. A lot can change. Nothing's changed, he argues with his mother.

- I'm fine.
- I know you're fine. You just look a tad wan.

The tale is relayed in bits and pieces: When his affair ended, he was booted out of his girlfriend's London flat and took up residence in a cottage on the coast. He has no plumbing, hence the beard. He draws cold water from an outdoor pump, bathes in a basin, and reads most of his days. He has read all of Marx and a good deal of philosophy; that much is clear after talking with him for just a few hours. He is writing poetry and is tutoring small children in the village. He laughs,

- It was good enough for Wittgenstein. It's good enough for me. Of course, Wittgenstein failed miserably as a teacher.

William asks:

- Who is Wittgenstein?

Shauna asks:

- Are you failing miserably?

Theo would prefer being on the dole, he says, but he has no rights as a foreigner. He's afraid to let the authorities know he's still in the country. Yet people who can live happily on social service benefits, he explains, ought to do so. That would leave scarce jobs to those who need to work to affirm their identity. It's an ethical imperative, he explains, and he feels pain that he cannot live according to his principles, but that is how it is.

William shakes his head. The two brothers can hardly speak to each other, a study in contrasts as they look down at their grandma laying in the hospital bed. Theo asks,

- Do you think she can hear us?

Shauna nods,

- I think the safest thing is to assume she can.

William is all business even here, reading over his grandmother's medical charts as if they are his stock reports. Theo, always retiring, has grown so thin and pale during his stay in England he seems to almost disappear against the backdrop of his grandmother's bed sheets as he sits on the side of her bed and leans over to kiss her. Shauna wishes so that Eliza were here. These two children understand each other. Except for the vast difference in their height, Theo more than six feet tall and Eliza barely five foot high, they even look so much the same. That chestnut brown hair and pale complexion, the freckles Eliza tries hard to avoid with creams.

- Theo, you look so pale. Are you sure you are eating properly?

He explains that he was out in the garden, growing his own vegetables and taking in the sun until it disappeared altogether in November. That is the way it is on the coast. Cold. He doesn't have central heat. He hardly has heat at all, but there is a fireplace in the cottage.

- Don't worry, Mother. I won't freeze to death.
- You might catch your death of pneumonia.
- Oh, Mother. It's Eliza who you should be worried about; she's the one who's sick. Can we phone her? You have your cell phone on you?

Eliza stays up all night on Christmas Eve knitting so there she sits on the couch by the tree, lighting the small candles on the tree to chase away the pre-dawn gloom. She pads around the empty house barefoot. She pours herself a drink of mineral water. She unwraps her present, the gift from

her mother, only the one gift, as is their tradition on Christmas Eve. It's an antique silver hand mirror. Eliza rolls her eyes: elegant, of course. Her mother's attempt to be deeply meaningful, or at least relevant—a mirror, like the lady's. She hesitates just one moment, considering the traditions, anticipating a letdown that always follows the gift opening on Christmas morning, then rips open all the rest of her presents, strewing wrappings and ribbons everywhere among the crumbs of her Christmas bread that she finds too dry. Once she's opened the make-up bag, the books, the beaded necklace and slippers, she sips tea and calls her family across the country, the time difference working to her advantage. It's 7:30 a.m. their time. Surely they're up.

Indeed, Shauna has been up most of the night, still jet lagged. She had set out under the tree her mother's gifts: tee shirts for the boys, and colognes and candy. Books for Theo. She left books and a vanity mirror for Eliza under the tree back home. Eliza knitted or sewed everyone's presents and slipped them into Shauna's suitcase, so Shauna set those packages under the tree as well: a sweater for Theo, a throw for Shauna, socks and a cap for William and wool gloves for he grandmother.

William has purchased expensive gifts, and had Shauna and Theo unwrap them last night: a gold locket for his mother and a laptop computer for Theo. The laptop, he assured his younger brother, was purchased at a significant discount from his office. They are upgrading. There is an adaptor for European outlets and it has an extra battery pack, he explains to Theo. Theo is fascinated and genuinely grateful. William plays on his brother's fascination, showing him how to upload his backup files into cyberspace this morning. Eventually they shower and shave and get ready to head back to the hospital.

Is it too early to call Eliza, Shauna wonders, only moments before the phone rings, as she imagines her daughter preparing the Christmas feast for her friends: breakfast foods first, eggs and baked cheese with fruits, fresh and candied and poached pears, baked apples. The more elaborate supper sat ready in the frig to be baked slowly all day and served on china and silver and planks set down on the family's heirloom linen clothes. Plates of carved beef, duck, turkey and savoury sauces will spill over slabs of breads of all kinds. Planks they're called; no plates or cutlery are used. Eliza will begin nibbling on a crust as old friends of the family, Harry and Becky and Trisha, who have recently arrived back from Cuba, take seats around the table. The stories they will tell to the sound of Latin jazz, CDs of Cuban music stealthily hidden in Billie Holiday cases no doubt.



Shauna picks up her phone too late; Eliza has hung up. When she returns her daughter's call immediately Eliza doesn't pick up.

The tree in LA will be entirely lit up tonight. Shauna found some authentic candles and holders for the tree, and imagines how Eliza and her friends will light them after dinner. But for now this is enough, the smell of pine and of cedar boughs arranged with berries and fruit on the table here in Oswego, the warm light from the kitchen her mother had painted cottage yellow. The hospital wing where her mother is recovering has open visiting hours. She calls to Theo and William.

- Are you almost ready?

Perhaps Eliza slept an hour here on the couch. The sun isn't rising yet, but it's 5 a.m., almost morning, 8 a.m. in Oswego and surely her brothers are up unwrapping their presents. Theo's going to love his sweater. William too, but he will complain that it makes him look older, fat. She cheers up and she sits down with her laptop, clicks on Second Life which takes forever to load. Theo's avatar sits down next to her, taking the head of the table opposite Shauna's avatar, Queen Bea, leans over and kisses Eliza's avatar, Lady, on the forehead though Lady looks in the opposite direction, watches the goings on as a reflection in the hand mirror she holds. He passes her another plank, a slab of bread spread with Brie cheese. She accepts. She eats. She eats that slab and then another, with fruit and butter. Queen Bea can hardly believe her computer animated eyes. Even the glass of sparkling wine is more than she expected her daughter to indulge in, but of course this is Christmas morning; their grand winter feast has begun. Eliza drinks water, her Lady in the tower sips wine, laughing with Theo and now even as the second set of platters are set out she even engages in a conversation with Shauna's friend, an avatar Eliza names Nazi-fem, a sharp nosed avatar with a tight corset and laced breasts spilling over the top of her gown.

They only depart from medieval traditions to enjoy coffee with their Christmas bread, now gathering round the tree, Lady supervising the candle lighting. The tree on Eliza's small computer screen is dwarfed by the tree in the living room still alive with the small flames flickering, that throw a spell over the room that is now totally silent. Silent night, Eliza begins the song in her strong soprano voice. The song seems to echo in the empty house as Eliza is pulled out of the full tower on her screen into the quiet room. A mocking bird pierces the still morning somewhere outside. Eliza wrings her hands and sets down the hand mirror she forgot she is still holding, a

prop here, a gift duplicated in the scene she'd created on her screen that now goes dark as the battery dies. She hopes her grandma is okay, wishes Theo were here, or even Stanley. She and her brother have been friends as well as siblings. He would understand what's between her and Stanley; they know everything about each other. Yes, Christmas morning in Second Life seems little more than a shadow; now she has to plug in her computer to recharge the battery.

## Chapter 21

They arrive at the hospital early Christmas day. Hilde and Alicia are already there, having checked with the nurse. Her mother's awake, fully conscious though a bit confused. The sisters kiss and exchange this much information, Theo and William standing stiff. Their Aunt Alicia is almost a stranger to them both, but now they all spill into their grandmother's hospital room. Theo hurries over to kiss his Granny, his favourite.

- And how is everyone?
- We're great, Grandma. We're so happy you've come around, to visit with us! Merry Christmas!
- Am I a great-grandma? Has someone had a baby? Theo, is that you?
- No, Grandma. I mean, yes, of course it's me. I flew in yesterday and came by but you were asleep. I wanted to be with you for Christmas, but don't you think this is a tad over-dramatic, this hospital scene. What the hell have you got yourself into here?
- Did you say you've had a baby?

- No Grandma. I haven't had a child. At least, not that I know of. If I do, I'll tell you first, Grandma. You'll be the first to know. And I'll name her after you. I'll name her Ginnie if I have a girl.
- He simply meant we're doing great. We're fine, Grandma. How are you feeling?

William leans over now too to kiss his grandmother. His grandma closes her eyes to receive his kiss.

- I'm so happy for you all. It's very nice, you coming to see me. Did you think I was going to die. Do you think still they think I'm going to die? I'd hate to disappoint people, on Christmas, no less. Dying would be bad form, don't you think?

Alicia shakes her head, but Theo laughs and assures her,

- Yes, Grandma, bad form indeed so we're glad to have you still with us. You had us worried.
- Okay, but don't make any long term plans involving me. Was Santa Claus good to you children?

William nods.

- Santa Claus lives! The shirts are great, Grandma.
- There you go again. You just said I'm not a great-grandma, not just yet.
- No, not yet. And thanks for the shirts.
- Did they fit?
- Just like they always do. One can never have too many tees.
- You boys are so tall now.

Shauna wants to speak to her sister in the hall, to see if she's spoken to the doctors. Yes, and Ginnie is doing so well they expect a full recovery. Of course she has to be watched. Yes, as you know, Alicia explains, she's had a stroke last summer, but perhaps it was so minor. No, she didn't tell any of us. Alicia protests as she and Shauna come back into the room. Her mother asks.

- Is everything alright?

Hilde rolls her eyes.

- Yes, Mother. And really we will be having a wonderful time here, seeing each other, all the sisters back together for Christmas. Well done, Mother! You have your whole family back together again!

William and Theo exchange looks as Shauna and Alicia step away from the bed to distance themselves from that comment, while Ginnie doesn't miss a beat.

- But where's my Eliza Bear?
- Mom, she has the flu and they said she shouldn't travel. This H1N1 flu is going around, you know, they're afraid for you, for everyone. She sends her love, of course.
- What's that noise?
- It's the monitor, Mother. It indicates you're doing well.

Alicia is fine with their mother staying in hospital for the entire holiday but if the hospital wants to release her right away, and they do seem inclined to have her released, perhaps Shauna and the boys can stay through New Years day and take care of her. Alicia can take it from there. She has raised four sons with her good husband they all refer to as The Rock. Alicia has had no career, though a full life taking care of all those men, and seems to think everything is fine. Shauna marvels at her sister's capacity for denial just as Alicia worries about the weight Shauna carries, talks about how hard it must be, being a widow. She advises Shauna about men, about sons in particular.

- I know really you have had more experience than me with men, but I am surrounded. And how are you with Theo living in England?
- Theo seems fine.
- What is he doing in England?
- He doesn't seem to know.
- I don't know how you cope. I'd be worried sick.

The two sisters have spoken a great deal in the past about how Shauna might cope. Shauna used to worry for her sons and turned to Alicia. Alicia has learned how to talk to men, even to her sons, such that they will tell her anything, even the truth. She has talked to Shauna about how men become men, and how they need a father but she guesses with Shauna's sons this can't be helped. One time, over the phone. Alicia explained,

- It happens sooner or later. I've heard men talk about it and then I watched it happen to each of my sons. It's that presence a father has, that physical strength. I'm not even talking about brutal men. You know, normal ones.

Shauna was silent, making listening noises, so that Alicia continued.

- Up until a certain point the father has a physical domination that everyone takes for granted, but sooner or later, say when the son is about seventeen, the father slaps him and the son says, 'Don't you ever hit me again.' That is a turning point. Childhood is over and their relationship is changed forever. They are two men now. The son has become a man.
- My sons have become fine grown men without ever getting slapped down.
- Yes, I was wondering, how did you do that?

- Do you think we should try to catch the discharge planner before she leaves for the day?
- Yes, at the very least we need to order a hospital bed for Mom.
- At the very least I think they should keep her for another day.
- You didn't say, though. Is Eliza okay?
- She's fine. She's very disappointed, of course, not to be seeing Theo.
- Maybe she can fly in tomorrow if she's better.
- But she has plans, plans to be with her friends.

Indeed, she has planned everything and her friends come online early each evening and they play out the Mummers Play in the castle by the sea Eliza has created. The story is simple, though they use different scripts on different nights to avoid monotony. This evening two characters knock their wooden swords together until one is killed and the doctor arrives to cure the dead man. Carl's avatar, Mulroy, plays the doctor on the second night. The characters and audience, who are one and the same, cheer him on as the doctor boasts.

*I cure all aches and pains,  
hiccups, chilblains and migraines.  
the itch, the stitch, the gump, the gout  
the pain within and the pain without.  
If the devil's in a man I can drive him out.  
Give me an old wife of fourscore and ten  
and I can make her young again  
Why I can cure the lovesick maid.*

Stanley plays Father Christmas that second night, his avatar dressed in a long robe and winter cap, and Mulroy asks:

*And how came you by your knowledge?*

Stanley replies, keying the lines into the chat room box:

*I've travelled high. I've travelled low.  
I've travelled the land of ice and snow.  
Icaly, Picaly, France and Spain  
'round the world and back again.  
I don't go about like them rafty-sham doctors.*

Eliza's friends have seen it all before, not merely the mummers' play but also its cousin that they studied together in drama classes, the Italian commedia dell'arte, so they embellish. Randy first pointed out the similarities and he and Teresa shout out Pantalone's lines in unison.

*You are a veritable avalanche of medicine!*

They await Father Christmas' return and they will not be disappointed. Well, just a little disappointed because Stanley seems to have forgotten his lines. Eliza prompts, tapping in the first line, then presses 'enter':

*In comes 'he', Old Father Christmas;*

And now Stanley jumps in:

*Welcome or welcome not,  
I hope Father Christmas  
Will never be forgot.*

The others key in their raucous response:

*Never! Never!*

Press [enter].

That second Christmas night Eliza dreams she is in a pine forest. That dream dissolves into another; she is in the works of a giant clock, with great bronze bells chiming. Then, sometime toward morning, she is at her grandma's house in Oswego and flashes on a wrist that is bleeding, a knife cutting into her wrist and it must be she herself cutting but why a knife; why not a razor blade? She wakes up in a cold sweat, her fever broken, rips

off her wet nightgown, and is calmer now. But she can't help shake the dream and her disgust at her lack in ingenuity—a knife. How ridiculous. A failure of the imagination. And this is no way to celebrate their Christmas holiday, all alone while her friends are in town. But she's warned them off: possibly the flu, swine flu, she warns them and no one comes by. She falls back to sleep practicing her lines, but silently in her dream, and these aren't the lines from the mummers play:

*Mother, I love you.*

*Mother, I hate you.*

*Why did you leave me, you god-damn cow?*

*Mother, I forgive you.*

*No hard feelings.*

On the other side of the continent by day Shauna runs the vacuum cleaner. The dishwasher is no sooner run and emptied then it is filled again with the boys' dirty dishes. They order pizza and wings so there are no pots and spend the day at the hospital. Theo is flying out on Monday. He can't be persuaded to fly back east, to visit Eliza in Los Angeles. To catch the flu? he asks.

- She is coming to visit me anyway, this spring. To take those courses and finish her high school degree.

The last night in Oswego, New Year's, their grandmother sleeps in her own bed; the hospital bed has proven unnecessary. William is tethered to the electrical outlet so as not to wear out his computer's battery. He's got Second Life downloaded so he and Theo can join in with Eliza's friends and the lady in Los Angeles, though they're all meeting on some beams a satellite God knows where, Theo likes to remind him. Shauna holes up in the living room. Earlier in the day Eliza emailed a poem, dedicated to her, though she cannot understand the sense of the dedication:

On the screen, light is everything  
or makes everything visible. It is not me  
but the script, the camera angle.  
The director and cameraman tangle,  
is she so short? Get the apple box for her to stand on.  
Make her large and you, he says to me, be large.

There is a trick I do. I inflate  
and then am large enough and on the box  
tall enough to make it understood, if not too late  
that this is she who they say it is.  
She is in a rage but the tirade softens her  
suddenly, tender as a rabbit in my cage.

Superbly, more subtly than they asked  
I can be, can do anything. I can  
but it is not me they get.  
It is my work, to fuck or kill  
or birth or eat or dance. It is a skill  
and nothing more. Then I leave the set.

This way I am always testing God  
and creating myself, to enrage or please, to know  
that I am noticed. Eh, it is not for God  
but for myself that I act so  
and God, if God exists, permits the show  
to the end of the performance when it matters  
not if the audience approves  
but can I abide myself, yes or no.

So that's how she explains everything to Shauna, that acting is her work. Of course, but the self-reflexivity in last stanza concerns Shauna, and also that Eliza would be inclined to send it to her at all.

William wanders into his grandmother's kitchen and takes the last piece of pumpkin pie out of the fridge. They'll wrap up the leftovers to take on the airplane the next day. William, Theo, move into the living room, in the twinkling lights of their grandmother's memory tree. They are quiet and happy enough. William breaks the spell.

- It's time I hit the hay, I'm afraid. Tomorrow Grandma begins the rehab. I'll take her before I go to the airport.
- Don't be ridiculous. She's going to need someone to stay with her. I'll go.

- And Eliza's mummers play ends. I promised her I'd join her online for this, the grand finale.
- And tell me again, what is this play about?

William shakes his head.

- A lot of nonsense.

But Theo rises to Eliza's defence.

- It brings back the sun after the solstice and protects our home from disasters in the coming year.

Theo jumps up, grabs Santa's beard, pulls the elastic over William's head to hold the white cotton in place across his chin, and beckons his brother:

- Join me, fellow tipteerer of Sussex!

He takes the laptop from William and sets it up so that both brothers and their mother can see the screen. Second Life uploads slowly but finally the lady holds the hand mirror up so that they see her smiling reflection on the screen. She sings:

Steadily with feeling

1. A... Glo-rious an- gel from Hea-ven came Un... to the Vir- gin... Maid...

Strange News and ti- dings of great joy... the hum- ble Ma- ry had...

the hum- ble... Ma- ry had...

1. A Glorious angel from heaven came unto the Virgin Maid,  
Strange News and tidings of great joy the humble Mary had,  
the humble Mary had.
2. Each mortal man remembers well, When Christ came down from  
Heaven,  
'Twas for our sins and wicked ways, His precious blood was given,  
His precious blood was given.
3. Each mortal man remembers well, When Christ was put to scorn,  
He was taken to the judgement seat, and crowned with the thorn,  
and crowned with the thorn.
4. Each mortal man remembers well, When Christ our Saviour died,  
He was crucified upon the tree, With thieves on either side,  
With thieves on either side.
5. Each mortal man remembers well, When Christ died on the rood,  
'Twas for our sins and wicked ways, Christ shed his precious blood,  
Christ shed his precious blood.
6. Each mortal man remembers well, When Christ was wrapped in clay,  
He was taken to a sepulchre, Where never man did lay,  
Where never man did lay.
7. God bless your house, your children too, Your cattle and your store,  
The Lord increase you day by day, And give you more and more,  
And give you more and more.

William applauds.

- Well said! Well said!

Shauna cannot match her children's energy, suddenly feeling the weight of her mother's medical crises and partial recovery that means this family scene will be repeated, perhaps many times. Theo and William are

so absorbed with the action on the screen they barely notice their mother rise to her feet.

Across the continent Eliza sets her laptop back down on the ottoman near the tree, the angle fine, and picks up her knitting.

Theo pats William's shoulder and looks up at his mother.

- Good night, Mom.

Shauna heads toward the stairs.

- Happy New Year, children. Thanks for everything.

Eliza too stands up abruptly, turns on the chat function that pops up at the bottom of the screen. It's Stanley but using his code name, Sir Rudolph.

- R U alone?

- No T & W are here.

- O.K. Well, I'm out of here. Happy New Year.

- Back at you.

So the three siblings remain online by their respective trees. William gets bored soon and closes his laptop, sighs, goes into the kitchen and cuts himself a large piece of pumpkin pie that he tops lavishly with whipped cream from a can. He checks and sees that Theo isn't looking and puts the nozzle in his mouth, filling the mouth with the cream.

Theo remains contemplative, hardly moves his avatar nor taps anything into the chat area. Eliza respects his reticence if that's what it is. They might sit there in silence for hours until finally Theo will turn in for the night while Eliza, three hours earlier in her time zone, will stay there alone by the tree, refusing to let go of the night.

She sighs,

- I am half sick of shadows.

## Part III

*A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,  
He rode between the barley-sheaves,  
The Sun came dazzling thro' the leaves  
And Flamed upon the brazen greaves  
of bold Sir Lancelot.*

## Chapter 22

Back home, Shauna finds Eliza pale and thinner despite all her holiday cooking.

- Mother, I was sick. The flu. What do you expect?

That it was a ruse, an excuse to stay here with her friends is what Shauna has expected, but it seems Eliza's friends didn't visit with her, or if they did, they ate none of her cooking. It is all wrapped carefully in the freezer, labelled with a black Sharpie pen, "Venison roast," "Gingerbread."

Shauna falls asleep on her bed, wakes up, goes downstairs. She sits on the yellow armchair by the fire place across from her daughter for several minutes. January. Eliza is leaving for the East Coast in the morning. At five a.m. the airline limo will be at their front door to pick her up to take her to the airport where she'll fly first to JFK and for reasons she tried to explain to her mother, calculations between Eliza and her agent that Shauna didn't quite follow, she is to stay overnight in New York, flying out the next morning to Halifax and then by land transport—taxi, train, auto—to Cape Breton.

Eliza Bear hates to fly. She's afraid of heights. She sits there by the fireplace tonight, all night, knitting. Everything is packed and ready for her departure. She is ready and seems so calm, seems to be thinking about nothing. It is only a short film shoot, and hers a small part in the movie



with a director with whom she's worked before, had another small part before. It doesn't count for her, really. She'll be away for only a week.

Shauna begins pacing. She thinks of everything, warm underwear, the down parka, sunscreen, love potions, but drugs might only worsen Eliza's already unnatural passivity. Shauna sets down again in the yellow armchair by the window. Eliza stares. She knits.

- Dear, don't you think it's time we pack it in?

Eliza doesn't respond at all. Shauna realizes that her daughter has her earbuds on, that she's listening to music she downloaded to her iPod. Shauna tries again, several decibels louder.

- Eliza Bear, it's so late.

Eliza unplugs.

- Mom, I'm going to stay up for a while. Why don't you go to bed?
- I want to spend this time with you. If I sleep now you'll be gone when I wake up.
- That's ridiculous.
- You're right. I'll get up to make you breakfast.
- They'll serve breakfast on the plane. You need your sleep. I'll just come in and kiss you goodbye.
- Don't be crazy. If I'm not taking you to the airport, the least I can do is to see you to the door. My alarm is already set.
- So is mine.
- Would it be OK with you if I turned on the stereo?
- Please. My Billy Holliday CD is still in there.

Shauna watches her, noticing family resemblances. In their tribe a woman does not always sleep at night. It is a habit passed from generation to generation of women. Shauna is the exception; she never developed the habit of keeping watch over the night. At night she usually embraces sleep. Not Eliza. Eliza is the woman of the house by night. She keeps watch and she knits. What is Eliza doing still up? What is she herself doing up, Shauna wonders now? She is lost in the house and in the middle of her life. It is as if she fell asleep with the book in her lap—she did—the pages fanned out, and she can't remember where she stopped reading. She can't find her place. But it must be different for her young daughter, although she too looks lost, sitting by the fireplace, knitting. For her a book hasn't yet been written. It is blank, just as she has that blank stare. She is wandering among the blank pages, unable to begin, without inspiration to begin the book.

- Do you miss your brothers, Liza Bear?
- No, not really.
- It was a wonderful holiday, despite everything.
- Awesome, I'm sure.
- Theo seems to be doing great. I just wish he'd get a job.
- Whatever. Mother, that's just who he is.
- He could find a proper job. I don't suppose that would erase his identity.
- He has found a proper job, tutoring. He can't do anything more until he gets his immigration status straightened out. You know that, Mother.

Shauna cannot imagine her son as an immigrant, least of all an immigrant to Wales. That is all history. Immigrants were the people who came here, came to North America. They're still coming. Everyone wants to come, so why would Theo leave? It's retro.

- Are you okay, then, Liza Bear?

- I'm fine, Mother. I'm not like you.
- What do you mean by that?
- The way you slowly sort everything out, the way you sort laundry.

Shauna understands. It's the way she matches things, folding them into themselves, shaking, smoothing and stacking those things, like socks.

- I haven't done the laundry since I got back.
- I meant in a manner of speaking, Mother. You have a gift for making order, and it matters if things don't match. It's like a crisis of faith for you.
- Really?
- Go to bed, Mother. It drives me crazy, watching you watching me.

Eliza is right. It was Shauna's faith that everything can be put in place, can be mended if given care, if mended and properly sorted. When carefully thought out, in time everything makes sense. That is history. It might take generations. But now it seems not everything comes to something. Shauna has lost faith, even in history.

- For me, Mother, I have to start from scratch, and begin again. It's the job.
- Are you all right?
- I'm fine.

It is so quiet in that room. Shauna pulls her chair up across from her stereo, and checks what CD is in the player. Yes, of course. Billy Holiday. Eliza thinks Billy Holiday is a goddess like Aretha and Shauna supposes she is right, but the kind of goddess who develops a bad drug habit. Shauna mentions this to Liza Bear.

- You know both your hero in that Tennyson poem and Billy Holiday were suicidal maniacs.

Liza Bear groans,

- Mom, please, can you just shut up and enjoy the music?
- Don't speak to me that way!
- Don't be that way.

Shauna stops speaking to her daughter altogether. Sitting there, listening, she drifts in and out of sleep in the big stuffed chair, listening to the strains of the music: *My baby just cares for me*. It's Eliza who breaks the spell.

- Do you see the way the moon is, in the mirror over the fireplace, Mother, shining next to the street lamp so that it looks like there are two moons? Both reflecting light.
- Hmm?
- So like there are four moons. I don't understand that. Is it the same light, what I see and what the mirror reflects, or is there somehow a new light?

Shauna remains quiet.

- Oh, I'm sorry. You were asleep. Why don't you go back to bed, Mom?
- I can't sleep.
- I'm keeping you up.
- No.

Shauna prevaricates. She is sleepy but it is like this almost every night recently and she has grown accustomed to staying awake. Eliza sits there

keeping watch, staring into the dark although there is nothing particular in the night to watch for, no predators threatening them, no marauders. She sits there knitting a bright orange strip that fades into terracotta, the colour of earth. It will be a long scarf. But it cannot be seen in this darkness, the colours. Whenever Shauna comes down to check on Eliza, to ask her if she is not afraid of the dark Eliza says no, she is not afraid of the dark; she is afraid of what might be *in* the dark. Yet in shadows everything occurs for her. She hides from the day like a vampire. The light hurts her eyes, the sun freckles her skin so she hides from the sun, hides where shadows move within shadows. This explains why it has taken Shauna seventeen years to understand her daughter, to perceive the obvious; she is so fair yet she is dark and it was dark, or almost dark. This partially explains it.

Shauna once suggested,

- Honey, if you're going to be doing all this travelling alone, you should take one of those self defence classes.
- I'll carry a gun when I'm old enough to get a licence.
- You don't have to kill the creep; learn how to throw him to the ground, disarm him, maim him if you have to. You don't need a gun. Besides, if you don't know how to disarm him, almost certainly he'll know how to disarm you.

Shauna once demonstrated to Eliza Bear how she can break boards with her bare hands. She took her daughter out into the yard and placed a board between the brick wall and some cinder blocks, setting a board across them like a limbo stick. Eliza was laughing, and Shauna told her just to wait and she won't be laughing, just wait and see what her mother can do. Shauna focussed, aimed directly beneath the board as she was taught to do in her class at the Y. Crash. Liza Bear was still laughing as Shauna rubbed the side of her swelling hand, the board lying there in two pieces.

- I prefer shadow boxing, Mother. Throw a punch at an imaginary opponent. You don't even have to connect to win.
- This isn't a sport; it's a skill.

- Shadow boxing is a skill. There's also shadow kissing, Mother, very dark and again, no contact.
- Where do you get such ideas?
- I make them up.
- Okay. Well, if that's the way you want it then that's the way it's going to be. As for me, I've got to step out now and again, and I want to be safe.
- I'll wait up for you, Mother, when and if you ever do go out.

That was then and this is now. This night is different because in the morning Eliza is going to fly off to the East Coast to shoot a film there, or rather to be shot. She will pretend to die again in the final scene, all ninety-two pounds of her. She has so nearly disappeared already, it should be easy to pretend.

- I'm going outside for some air, Eliza Bear. Care to join me?
- No, Mom. I'll just wait here.

Shauna goes out wearing only her robe in the middle of the night, and that is how she winds up on the outside and Eliza on the inside, knitting.

The truth is, Shauna went outside to rail against the moon and against Eliza's dead father, outside where she won't be heard. Couldn't her dead husband have arranged things differently, to be here to tell his daughter everything she needs to know, everything about show business and about men and all these other things that worry her, things Shauna knows nothing about. There is so much about which Shauna feels she knows nothing. For instance, she knows nothing about him, about what a dead father means to Eliza. And she knows nothing, or nearly nothing about the man who more recently must have stolen Eliza's heart to leave her so passive. Shauna doesn't even know if there was a man. Certainly it wasn't Stanley, nor any of the young men that might have filled the house over Christmas. Eliza assures her there were none, except those virtual visitors who performed the mummies play and feasted on Second Life. Shauna was watching for

any sign that there had been actual visitors. Perhaps there was a new lover, some sign of a new lover but none was given.

So why, why is she wasting her time out here thinking about Eliza's father? He is long dead. Everything is taken care of. The laundry and even the metaphor of the laundry, everything is folded away, neatly packed up. Except Theo's t-shirts that somehow wound up in her suitcase remain soiled in the laundry basket now weeks after the Christmas holiday. Shauna is reluctant to replace the scent of her son with that of fabric softener. That is all that remains to be done: laundry. But Eliza has her script and her special face creams and the sun screen packed. She is peacefully waiting for the morning, waiting in the house, and even the house itself has come in between the subject I and the object of this thought that Shauna has come to, Eliza's *you*. When Eliza is gone there will only be this I. Shauna stands outside the house in the middle of the night wearing only a bathrobe looking for an escape from that moment, so that one more time she can go inside and Eliza will be there. Eliza looks up from her knitting and asks,

- Isn't it getting cold out there? Close the door, please, Mother. You're letting in the cold.

Shauna listens for an animal in the night garden that will remind her of something outside the house that she can follow and even maybe become, some animal that would teach her something before she returns to the house and to her daughter there knitting. Was it always in her imagination, a possibility that she could come outside and find an animal when she never actually imagined the animal, only the possibility of imagining it, and the possibility of imagining it is enough? She is in the garden and there is in fact nothing outside the house that is of any use to her at forty-eight years of age.

It was fruit she was thinking of before she came outdoors tonight. And not just tonight. Actually, ever since her fortieth birthday she has felt like a split peach, a fleshy pink-to-orange peach. The thing and the colour must have the same name, peach, because its thing and its color are so much the same. There, I did it, she muses. I went beyond myself, the split I feel, to think about the thing, another thing and its qualities. But no, with the peach she thinks of herself, the colour and the thing. So there it is, half here, half there, split and the pit exposed in the moonlight. And her work half done, half undone, and her children grown but still her children and her life, still hers.

There, finally, she is thinking about herself and Eliza in separate thoughts, so that Eliza can be Eliza, so that she can think about herself. But it has taken a rather long time to get here. There were so many people crowding the doorway that it is difficult for her to pass the object, and to think back to the subject, I, so she can think about herself alone. There are still so many others to consider, but she doesn't for a second mistake this crowded doorway as indicating a generous spirit, an open house. The house was to be full recently only because it was Christmas but remained, and still remains almost empty. It is not a spiritual value, this selflessness in the crowd within this woman's thoughts before she becomes the I who thinks her thought. It is a kind of selflessness that is totally ungenerous; a self that has little left to give, nothing much to offer. Shauna wishes she had other words for this. Perhaps she should have talked more about such things with Ted when he was still living here, when he was still alive. What did they talk about? They talked hardly at all.

In her tribe of women who have stayed awake thinking, Shauna muses, they are not thinking of themselves at all because a kind of amnesia becomes a habit of mind, and in the end they attempt to take what is left of their own lives, these suicidal maniacs. Their attempts are unprincipled. Shauna has always believed as much. Which is not to say that what they did was unforgivable or incomprehensible, but it was not largeness of heart or mind, Shauna believes, or even suffering. It is merely absent-mindedness.

Is she thinking about her daughter? So many generations of women have distracted her. At least finally she can think about her and about the others who might also think about themselves. The change leads to an incredible outburst of creativity. Think about Theo who is tutoring children in a hut in England. And William making money schemes downtown. And Eliza, but what about Eliza? It is as if as soon as Shauna put these other people and things out of her mind, they produce many new things, so many that they threaten to overwhelm her. Only Eiza Bear remains here and tomorrow Eliza will be going to a small place on the other end of this continent to make a movie.

Shauna sees her through the pane of glass, looks at her through the back door. Shauna will go into the house and lie down on the sofa next to where her daughter sits in the yellow armchair. They will listen to the second CD, listen to more of Billy singing. It is so cold outside. It is January.

This is what her daughter is listening to when she does finally go back into the house, really, *God bless the child*, so maybe she is thinking about her father as well. Shauna doesn't know. She can tell nothing by the expression on her daughter's face. Shauna lies down on the sofa and falls asleep thinking that her dead husband must be totally decomposed by now, and that tomorrow her daughter will be flying across the country.

## Chapter 23

- Mom, I have to go now. The limo is here.
- What?
- I have to go.

It was only a few hours. Eliza must not have slept at all, and Shauna must have remained asleep curled up on the sofa while Eliza took a shower, dressed, and stands there, her long hair still damp, ready to go, leaning over the sofa to waken Shauna, to say goodbye. Shauna sits up, disoriented, but suddenly totally awake.

- Honey, I'm sorry. How long . . .
- It's fine Mom. I can't believe you can sleep scrunched up like that, but I didn't want to disturb you. You need your sleep. I'll sleep on the plane and sleep better tonight for having outsmarted jet lag. I'll be fine, Mom. Promise me you won't worry.
- Don't be silly. I'm your mother. It's my job to worry. Did you have anything to eat?

Shauna stands up and follows Eliza to the door, Eliza smiling. Eliza seems anxious to be off.

- This is going to be some fun. I've got the layover in New York and besides it's been too long since I've worked.
- Too long, Eliza Bear? You're only seventeen. You don't have too long behind you.
- It's been months.
- Take care. Have a good time. Take care.
- I will, Mom. And don't worry so much.
- Call me. Call me tonight from the hotel, and if you need anything.
- I will. You have all the numbers. All that. It's attached to the contract under the phone in your office.
- I remember. I love you, Liza Bear.
- I love you too, Mom.

She kisses her mother. They can see through the glass in the door that the limo driver is standing there impatient. She kisses Shauna again quickly and lifts her suitcase. Shauna hurries to help her with it, but she is dressed only in a bathrobe that falls open as she bends over. They laugh and Eliza heads out alone.

It is five in the morning, still as dark as night. Shauna watches the limo drive away, waving to Eliza from the doorway and watching to see her daughter waving back. Shauna is not sure whether or not her daughter waved to her or didn't. Shauna thinks she can remember her daughter's face shining in the limo's dome light, her eyes squinting the way they do when she is excited and waving goodbye to her mother, but Shauna can't be sure now that she truly remembers it happening this time or just remembers that this happens sometimes. Perhaps this time Liza Bear simply drove away, leaning forward, talking to the driver. Shauna turns off the front

porch light, then turns off the lights in the living room and now that it's almost dawn she finally stretches out on her own bed.

Liza Bear will be gone five days. As soon as she leaves a cold snap hits. Rain falls, the cold winter rain that might last hours, maybe days. There has been so little rain this winter people are talking about drought, global warming, a bad fire season. People find fine weather in winter threatening so this rain is welcomed. There is a damp chill throughout the house. Shauna crawls under the duvet and remains curled up into a ball until she falls asleep.

## Chapter 24

The roads are dark and clear from West Hollywood to LAX this time in the morning, before rush hour clogs Fairfax and Highway 10. Eliza slumps down in the back seat of the limo and considers her character, not the part she's playing in Cape Breton. Another corset drama, fine with her, and good practice for *The Lady of Shalott* who doesn't wear a corset simply because she doesn't need one, and neither do I, except to hold up the jelly pads they tuck under my breasts which were too small even ten pounds ago, Eliza muses. She's thinking about the lady and not about Stanley who's meeting her at JFK and spending the night with her at the Larchmont Hotel in the village. This she arranged with her agent, that he would be her guardian because she's not yet eighteen and of course they used fake names. Stanley's still on the lam. But this is not what she's thinking about. She's thinking about the lady.

She's thinking, sometimes I hate the bitch, if you wanna know. I do know, actually, and you can only hate someone this much if you totally get them. The lady isn't merely misunderstood, except maybe by Tennyson who maybe is the asshole or a total liar, like Brad who insists he wrote the lyrics to his song that are almost exactly the same as "I Get Money" like he knows anything about the stuff 50 Cent knows and like Tennyson would have known anything about this girl even if she could be found anywhere so he's lying straight out. How could she possibly love anyone if she knows no one. She loves love. She wasn't sick of shadows so much as she was sick of all that desire. Unrequited love—it's self-love in her heart as much as

in her hand helping herself to herself because there isn't anyone else there. In a fantasy there's no back and forth, no give and take, no fucking (that's the part that really sucks) and no arguing (the good part). I have to stop thinking about this now.

I can only think in pieces because I'm hungry, fucking starving. I know that in a few days or weeks or months I will stop feeling hungry if I stop eating altogether. I'll get the runners high, will stop feeling hungry long before I'm dead. But I started eating normal recently and now I'm hungry all the time. This will reassure Stanley. He worries that I'm not eating. I'll eat dinner with him. That's cool.

If I were fucking ana at least I would indulge in Diet Coke and celery and pig out once in a while and then throw up, but I'm a hunger artist. This isn't a disease. It's a statement. It's the method. Fuck that. I crave diet coke. I was bikini-ready from the start. Way before the start. I never wasn't bikini-ready. That's not the point. The point is getting inside the lady's body and her head. Her body must have been sick of shadows way before she said anything of the sort. Finally it stopped being sick. Its nature was to stop wanting; that's the method. You just are it. That's all there is to it. It's so stupid I can't believe they've got schools to teach it, that people pay good money and talk all about it and insist that it's . . . Oh fuck. I've lost my thought. Oh, I was thinking about the whole ano underground that has nothing to do with what I'm about. The ana freaks are a movement, anorexia as a life-style. Fuck, I hate the idea of style. It's got to be more than style. It's got to be your life on the line. Weird though, these pro-ana girls, they are killing themselves for sure. Their lives are on the line. It just doesn't matter that they are killing themselves. They want to be beautiful, so skinny like that, but they'll still be ugly on the inside. I'm going online and telling them that. And then I'll let them know that I'm someone famous, because even if that means shit it will mean a lot to them that someone famous thinks they are full of shit. Maybe they'll eat something. Maybe I'll have saved their fucking lives simply by hating them. But why should I bother? It has nothing to do with what I'm on about here. Shadows. I'm not really sick of shadows yet. I still kind of like shadows. I hide there. Hiding in the shadows. Isn't that what they say?

## Chapter 25

Shauna must have slept round the clock and it's night, or rather the very early morning, when she discovers the rat. She had only vaguely been aware of its existence, a vermin she thought she might find outside in the dark, not inside, not in the house. Before Christmas she found the masks shredded, paper maché masks Eliza and her friends had made. The masks were stored in the garage, and Shauna suspected at first that a family of mice made a meal of them. The gluten in the paste was what the rodents craved; it was genuine hunger, not gluttony, the destruction of the children's art. And now it seems likely that it wasn't mice at all. It was the rat taking these things belonging to her daughter's happy days before she had become skinny and miserable. The rat. And with the masks gone, it is as if everything is gone.

Shauna crawled into bed and didn't get up much all day. Eliza called from New York. The weather is delaying everything. She is fine, staying in the city until the weather clears up on the coast but she will be gone longer than they had planned. No one's arrived in Cape Breton yet, except maybe some crew and the DP. Most are stranded in New York like her, a few in Halifax. Having spoken with Eliza on the phone briefly, this is all Shauna knows. This isn't in the contract. Eliza can be unsupervised in Canada but not in New York according to the SAG agreement because she's under-aged. They want Shauna to fax papers back to them at the hotel. Where's your manager? Shauna asks. What does she have to do with anything? Eliza shoots back. She's your manager, Shauna replies. What does that have to

do with anything? Eliza hisses. Marilyn is wonderful and she's agreed to be my guardian, for fourteen hours for fuck's sake. Eliza is preoccupied. Their conversation is scattered.

Three days later Eliza calls from Cape Breton. Okay, the weather cleared and they arrived, just a day late. She has been working night and day to catch up on the scenes they couldn't do on Tuesday, long hours, and everything that could go wrong has. The weather is only part of the problem. Tomorrow she has a day for rest and if the roads are clear she's going to this little village, but the truth is there is nothing at all to do in this place besides work, so on this one day when she doesn't have to work she's going to work with the Shalott script.

- Did you show it to Marilyn?
- Marilyn thinks it's brilliant.
- How is it working with her? I should have checked her credentials, honey.
- There wasn't time. It's fine, Mom. It's a formality. I'm almost eighteen. And here in Canada it's totally unnecessary. You know, Mom, Marilyn never finished high school either and is doing just fine
- But you're going to finish, aren't you?

Finally Eliza asks,

- How are you, Mother?

Shauna lies and says she's fine. Maybe she has a touch of the flu.

- Mom, when I get back it won't be for long. I think I should be moving out on my own soon.
- Yes, of course, dear. We'll talk about it when you get back.
- Mom, someone's at the door here. I have to run.



That's all she says, and hangs up.

Now Shauna can't sleep. What had been on her mind for weeks, in the back of her mind for perhaps months, now she can't get off of her mind. The rat. After the third day she wakes up and sees the little rat, the rat that had been nibbling so near her ear these past few nights, perhaps for months, maybe longer. Was that what has been waking her up? Some horrible little nibbling fear? But fear of what? Why, of the rat. The rat was nibbling near her ear, the rat the rat. It was the rat that was all but killing her, exhausting her, keeping her awake so that the house is in total disarray and no food is prepared. It is a rat that is going to lead to terrible violence, to her own demise and to her daughter's unspeakable suffering, left all alone now. Eliza will suffer as Shauna suffered. Because of the rat. Shauna didn't know, hadn't realized what was happening, because she was always asleep. She didn't know that the rat was whispering to her these thoughts. It wasn't her thought. Always it came to her from the outside, creeping into her head, but how? Over and over she asked herself if this is from outside, and it must be, this unspeakable ripping of the flesh on her arms, taking off the skin so that sometimes she would only see the knife ripping, but sometimes she would see her own fingernails and then it was actually happening so that she would wake up and find her arms red, a little blood once where the skin was torn, but always from outside herself. She didn't understand. Until she woke up in time. Tonight she met the rat.

The house rat is actually rather cute. It's brown with black paws. It has a pointy nose, dark rat eyes that peer into one's soul, but he isn't peering into Shauna's soul. He is gnawing at her ear and whispering, kill kill kill. There is no other thing to do. You die. As if that is the most obvious thing in the world. As if the question is not: why kill yourself? Rather the question is: why not? What else is there to do? Shauna didn't know about the rat, or perhaps she has known all along.

This isn't her first encounter with a rat. There was the rat she found in her home as a child, in the basement, in the rafters there, looking down on her when she was seven years old. She thought she would never forget the rat, it was so scary. Mamma, Mamma, she screamed but no one was home. Just her and the rat. She ran upstairs. She ran up the basement stairs and then up to the second floor and then up onto the widow's walk. She thought it could find her anywhere in this house, anywhere, so she ran downstairs and outside and down the street and into the ravine. It didn't

follow her there. The mean boys in the neighbourhood had told her that the ravine was crawling with sewer rats, and she had actually seen a rat down there, but she was not afraid of those rats. They were outside, as they should be. And in time, nestled among nearly bare trees and the brown and orange leaves that blanket the ground in Upstate New York in late October, she relaxed but it was cold, so she headed home on time for supper. She had nearly forgotten about the other rat, the rat in the basement.

Until now when there's this rat in her house in West Hollywood. The rat outside is now inside the house, gnawing, gnawing with its terrible innuendo.

Now she is finally staring at it, eye to eye. She's awake and staring right at it. It starts to run as it must have always run, so that she would not know how to get at it. This time she chases after it, to where it hides behind the wall. She sees its hiding place and now she will wait. She will wait and when it comes back out she will trap it.

The phone rings again, only the third time in all these days, and Shauna scrambles for her robe that she clutches in front of her body and picks up the receiver by the fifth ring. Each time before it was Eliza calling, and it is Eliza calling now.

- The weather finally completely cleared so we will finish the shoot today. I'm flying out tomorrow but again with a layover in New York. Mom, please don't make a big deal about this.

Eliza calls to ask Shauna. Shauna has to sign off on this, that's the law. For another few months, just a formality really. Has anyone ever confronted an almost-eighteen-year-old and won? Legally? And if it will bring her home sooner Shauna is willing. Shauna looks around. She has not been up, not been out of the house or even dressed all these days. She has to get up. She has to get dressed. She will get dressed and go down to the Kmart on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and buy some rat traps. She had better do that today. Or call an exterminator. She'll do both these things.

Really, she has no idea what should be done about the rat. She can't sleep anymore anyway. She has to watch, to keep watch by the wall, so that when it comes out she can kill it before it kills her. Or she can just leave. Kmart isn't open yet. She will dress and go outside. It is so cold that the dry skin on the bottom of her bare feet might split. The skin is so dry already,

nearly split anyway. She must remember to put slippers on in the house. The drying effect of going barefoot on the dry floors, and the cold stone in the garden. When the stores open she will go shopping. Rat traps and flipflops. Yes, the rat can look out for itself until she is back. She will go into the garden. And then tomorrow or the next day Eliza will be home.

## Chapter 26

Shauna puts the third load of laundry into the dryer, finally the sheets off Eliza's bed and the wine-stained table linens from the holiday. Eliza must have had some visitors, someone who spilled this wine. She had to run that load twice with bleach—even now the wine leaves grey blotches, having set so long. She sweeps the floor in the laundry room, then tackles the adjacent kitchen floor. She hadn't run the dishwasher with so few dishes since Eliza left, she'd eaten so little, and round circles of mould float in an upturned coffee mug she'd used to take her tea. Before she goes to meet Eliza's plane she'll stop at Whole Foods and the Farmers Market, fill the refrigerator with fresh fruit and organic vegetables. She can stop at Canter's for bread and those cheese pockets Eliza used to adore, and milk. She needs rice too. They are out of rice. And rice crackers. Eliza can always be persuaded to eat rice crackers smeared with apple butter.

After vacuuming through the living room she tidies the bedrooms. Eliza's room is neat as a pin. Shauna looks around her daughter's room, satisfied. The paint still smells fresh. They chose well, the egg shell with a little sheen, nearly flat. The prints on the wall, Venus and The Lady, look smart in their gilded wood frames against the clean walls. A quick swipe around the room with the vacuum, stretch the clean sheets on the bed, and this room is set for Eliza's return.

Shauna puts the vacuum away and moves into the bathroom. She fills the basin with pine scented detergent and washes the counters, scrubbing the toilet, the floor, then the basin itself. Finally dusting the bathtub with

powder cleanser, she takes a sponge to the tub, to the tiled walls, strips off her clothes, pulls the shower curtain, and climbs in, hosing everything down, the walls, and scrubbing her own body, watching the water and suds form a whirlpool around the drain. She stands beneath the shower hose. Hot water massages her back. She puts her head under the nozzle, pours shampoo first into her hand, then lathers her hair, spreading the lather down her legs and swiping the shaver up and down her legs quickly as the water pours over her bent back. She stays in the shower until the water begins to run cold, the hot water tank finally emptied from the cleaning frenzy.

Shauna steps onto the bath mat and grabs the roughest towel from the cupboard. This one she prefers, the course cotton against her skin, over her breasts and back, under her breasts, down between her legs and roughly rubbing down her legs. A small trickle of blood from a razor nick stains the towel. She hadn't noticed as she had shaved her legs. Then another stain. She stretches the towel and dries her back, tugging the towel back and forth across her back until her skin shines red in the bathroom mirror. Her long body now clean and her skin now tingling feels alive again, a bit weak perhaps. Perhaps that was just a bout of the flu after all, and now she's fine.

Eliza's plane will land in a few hours. Shauna had better get dressed quickly, and go down to Canter's and forget Whole Foods. She can get everything in the stores along Fairfax, and meet Eliza's plane on time.

Shauna chooses her clothes carefully, a pair of jeans that fit over her wool tights. She'll need that extra warmth in this cool weather, and a cotton sports bra under the white woollen sweater Eliza knit her for Christmas. A little blush over her cheeks, she plucks her brows, then eyebrow pencil, then mascara and lip gloss. This is as good as it gets, she sighs with some satisfaction as she checks herself in the full-length mirror in her room. She is ready to head down to Fairfax.

She considers the phone conversations she's had with Eliza over the last few days. She can hardly recall what was said—suddenly remembers. Eliza says she is going to move out soon. Shauna doesn't believe it. Eliza said, I really am leaving and soon. But how soon is soon? Shauna thinks. Soon can mean years. Meaning there may be another few birthday parties, but Shauna cannot plan on that. I don't make long term plans, laughed Shauna's mother from her hospital bed. Eliza just used the exact same expression: I don't make long range plans. But Eliza is anticipating maturity, not death. Why should Shauna equate the two? Most of a life is sandwiched between

maturity and death. A lot intervenes. Exactly as Lancelot intervened in the poem, singing a stupid tune, 'Tirra lirra' by the river. And for love of this tune and for his reflection in the lady's mirror, for this bit of bling the lady left her web and looked directly down to Camelot.

*Out flew the web and floated wide;  
The mirror crack'd from side to side.*

the baggage carousel. Find the nearest cross walk. Sure enough. There is the walkway. They cross over. Sure enough, there is the car.

Traffic is heavier now that the sun has set and the spaghetti circle to be negotiated to get onto the 105 forces Shauna to concentrate. Eliza looks out the passenger window and says nothing. Eventually she turns the radio on. The alternative rock station plays Kanye West and Eliza jabs at the buttons until the Fugees' *Vocab* catches, negotiating the two women's separate silence.

- You mind, Mom?

Shauna shakes her head. The music provides a cocoon that holds their peace. They take Pico and turn onto Fairfax, crawl through Little Ethiopia past LACMA and Johnnie's and are at the end of their street in no time, pulling into the carport. Shauna pops the trunk, Eliza grabs her bag, and as soon as they enter the house Eliza pecks her mother's cheek with a kiss, thanking her for the ride home and hurries upstairs to take a hot bath.

Over the next few days Shauna starts to notice how her daughter is constantly running her hands under hot water.

- What do you do that for?

- To warm up. I'm cold.

- I've turned the heat up.

- I'm still cold.

Eliza weighs only ninety pounds now. Shauna knows because she asked and because Eliza told her the truth. It scares Shauna who vows to take her to the doctor. To her surprise, Eliza agrees. Eliza wants to go to their family doctor, not to a specialist, and Dr. Moran will see her right away.

The next afternoon after Eliza's physical exam, Dr. Moran calls Shauna into his office, scans Shauna up and down, as if examining her health, with a studied professional air, then nods approval. She has passed the exam. He asks her to take a seat, wants to assure Shauna in Eliza's presence that he doesn't think there's a problem. Liza Bear is still within the low-normal

## Chapter 27

Shauna heads out to meet her daughter at the airport. The traffic isn't bad, although it is almost rush hour. The radio announcer suggests she stay off the 405—no problem. Shauna takes Sepulveda, crosses the expressway, looks over two rows of red taillights streaming out towards the beach communities. The sun starts dipping down behind the open field where the aircraft hangers stand in gold light reflecting off the walls of glass and beyond that the Pacific ocean. Shauna rolls down the windows and breathes it in.

As Eliza moves out of Baggage Claim she looks so much younger, smaller, thinner than in Shauna's memory, and after just six days. She has a chill and complains,

- I feel like I've been wet and cold since I left.

They hurry over to the parking structure, saying very little until Shauna realizes they can't find the car. Eliza takes the parking ticket from Shauna but it gives no hint. Shauna insists she parked the car in the blue section; this is simply a problem to be solved.

- Mother, retrace your steps in your head.

Okay, she parked the car, descended one flight of stairs very near a catwalk over the road to the terminal. Then it was one escalator down to

weight for her height. She is small, after all. Dr. Moran says that Shauna worries too much, and Eliza grins, nodding her agreement.

- See, Mother?

The doctor smiles and enquires,

- And how are you doing, Shauna?

The question sounds ridiculous to Shauna. There are other patients waiting there. They return home, laden with the doctor's pamphlets about birth control, STDs, and eating disorders.

It begins as a word play: a loss of innocence. The literature the doctor gave them about anorexia to placate the mother and to inform the daughter, has had the opposite effect on Shauna. Eliza knows a great deal on the subject. Offering a list of symptoms for a caring parent to watch out for, Shauna studies these and does watch, which only serves to annoy the daughter and to make her more secretive. Shauna goes over the checklist: early sexual experiences, incest and abuse, these are predictors. Major life changes are another factor. Maybe something happened on one of the shoots. Shauna couldn't be everywhere all the time, nor could Ted. Who knows how attentive Ted was on the set. Shauna trusted him, still trusts he did his best but shit happens. And the ill effect might not be evident for years. A girl might become either obese or anorexic in response, to confound her predators, the pamphleteer explains, to make herself unattractive or to delay pubescence.

It is an anti-aesthetic, Shauna concludes, and Eliza concurs. These issues don't apply to you, Eliza, but how is a mother to know really? And they don't mention the ill effect of a father's death. Eliza doesn't say anything more about it. Her third day back she spends most of the day in her room.

- I have to go to bed early, tonight. I'm still jet-lagged.
- But the time difference is so slight, and you've been home two nights already.
- There is also the weather change. The weather was so fucking cold. I had to walk outdoors, sometimes some distance, and

stand around for hours, my feet in those silly Victorian ladies boots. Why do we call them 'the good old days'? The women must have always had cold feet. And now, here, it's so damp. Don't you find it so, Mother?

- I don't, Eliza. But I'll throw a few logs into the fireplace.
- How anyone can romanticize an actor's job. Marilyn said that. She said, look at us, cold and miserable outdoors at three in the morning. This is glamour?
- Maybe it's the talk shows.
- Maybe. Good night, Mother.
- Good night.

- Why don't you change your clothes and go out with some other girls, have a good time?
- *Mother.*

And with less than a blink of an eye, a squint, a look, everything went crazy. How did it go from *Why don't you go out?* to *Get out!*

It did. It went crazy and then at the worst possible moment Shauna confronted Eliza with the box. That really did it. Why did she raise the issue of the Epsom salts just then, when they were both already upset? Retaliation. She asked, and Eliza feigned innocence,

- What are you saying? So I bathe? What's it to you?
- You need help. Why are you doing this?
- Doing what, bathing?
- You're doing yourself in. It's killing me.
- So it's all about you?
- What?
- You are insane. What business is it of yours?

Liza Bear threw a glass across the room at Shauna, shattering it against the far wall behind Shauna, shouting,

- Bite me.

Smack. See, Eliza drove Shauna to it. Shauna can't believe she hit her daughter. There is no excuse for this. She must go back and see the doctor herself.

She should have simply kept her mouth shut. Maybe suicide isn't in Liza Bear's head at all, never entered her thoughts, and now Shauna's put it there. Maybe Eliza's just really angry with Shauna. She is really angry, but for what? Ah yes, because Shauna is the one left. Her father is dead and her favourite brother has gone away to England, her old friends are gone

## Chapter 28

She does it with Epsom salts, Shauna is almost sure of it, to purge what little food she eats so that she can pretend to eat and yet continue her dying. Shauna is sure that this what she takes, Epsom salts. Liza Bear doesn't bathe that often and when Shauna threw out the box she found in the bathroom, tucked underneath the sink, a new box appeared within days. That means Eliza knows that Shauna knows. That means this is a threat.

It all began friendly enough. Shauna suggested Eliza might go to a movie. She could call a friend and go to a movie. She could get out. Eliza, dressed in that ugly goth dress Shauna hates, black with this dark green brocade panel in front that gives her skin a green tinge as if it's swallowing whatever colour comes near, as if her skin is so hungry it will steal colours.

- Okay, I'm going out but alone, not to a movie. I'll check out what's happening at the Green Room. Maybe some spoken word. Or the Knitting Factory. Did I tell you I went to the Knitting Factory when I was in Manhattan?
- No. You were there just overnight. By yourself? Why don't you ask one with your friends? What's happening with Jennifer these days?
- She's always busy. She's studying for her SATs. You know she's not so bright.

or gone on ahead of her and now even William, as irritating as he can be, is missed. Shauna is the only one upon whom the girl can unleash her rage, her insane fury at being locked in. She might come and go as she pleases but she never leaves, or so it seems. But she must, to replace the box of salts.

Now Eliza hates Shauna all the more because Shauna knows about the salts. Bite me, she said, that ugly expression Shauna doesn't understand. Bite me. What does that mean? It sounds sexual, but Shauna's imagination is more zoological, goes to a snake in the glass case. Eliza is the snake, sinking her jaws into Shauna's arm and spilling venom into the veins, but that turns everything around. The expression is 'bite *me*'. What on earth does the child mean?

Shauna is tempted to do just that. In a fever of rage, she might actually grab her daughter's arm and later she thinks she actually did bite her, might have, would have had Eliza not squirmed away. Ah, what a scene. Who would think it would come to this?

Shauna hopes her daughter recognizes how suicide threats backfire, that Shauna has known them all her life, knows that death is an empty threat, death signifying nothing, a snake encircling nothing. Shauna has no idea how to respond so she doesn't respond at all. She seethes, that's all. Maybe she should call the doctor. No, she will call a suicide prevention hot line and ask them what to do. Bite me. She will tell Eliza how self-destructive behaviour as an act of revenge almost always backfires. Shauna has been plagued by suicidal maniacs since she was seven years old. Eliza should know that she is sketching out her suicidal fantasies in the shadow of the master. She should know how her mother grew up in that shadow, that she never even got sunburned there in the shadows. They did, the masters. Other people feel responsible for their hangings, drug overdoses, carbon dioxide, all these dumb-ass stunts her mother, aunt, uncle, and granny tried to pull off. It's murder. And Shauna hates the murderer doubly for being both the murderer and the victim because she also hates victims. The weak tyrants, real tyrants, make people feel responsible. Tyrants. Shauna feels no pity for any of them. Should she tell Eliza? The most Eliza can hope for is that her mother will call an ambulance if it comes to that. Eliza should know.

Shauna will explain this rationally. She will explain that, if Eliza is angry and starves herself, she will be sick and her body hurting, not her mother nor her mother's body. If she purges, if she sticks her finger down her throat and consumes laxatives, her teeth will fall out of her head and

Shauna's, even though she is so much older, will remain intact. Eliza might suffer a heart attack, not Shauna. Shauna can explain all this sensibly. And if Eliza takes an overdose of pills, Eliza might be right to think Shauna will be very sad but Eliza herself will be downright dead. Does her daughter understand that, that her mother will live on? That she always has?

Shauna moves around the house alone, since Eliza has locked herself in her room. Shauna knows the house is hers but it doesn't feel like hers. Maybe it is the dream. She is sinking but not into sleep. She hasn't thought about God in years and supposes she won't again for years, but a prayer forms in her mind and she utters it.

- God, this time if you take everything away from me, please also take me.

A nonsense prayer, the self pity disgusts her. She doesn't even believe in God, but Shauna was baptized Catholic, remembers hearing that suicide is a mortal sin for Catholics, they go to hell and suffer for all eternity. Maybe she can baptize Eliza in her sleep and once Eliza is baptized Catholic Shauna can threaten her with eternal damnation if she doesn't start eating properly. Up the ante.

Sleep swallows up any thought but that sleep is a mercy and the next morning for the first time in many years she attends the local church. She is sitting in near-empty pews, people scattered throughout the church, some families, everyone looking straight ahead, listening to what is being said, but she doesn't listen and doesn't say anything. A cross hanging over the altar suggests something else. Shauna thinks of pornographic pictures, whips and bondage; she can't help it. This is a church so she shouldn't be thinking about this. She thinks for a moment that she might be able to make something of it, to outwit the violence. She crosses herself, as she's seen Catholics do, at least in movies. This isn't part of her life but here she is in a Catholic church after all. She will slip away while everyone else is going up to receive communion. She will be back home even before Eliza wakes up.

Bite me.

streetscape until late morning when the sun burns it off. There is a dark young man with a heavy jacket bent against the weight of his book bag who reminds Shauna of Stanley, but Stanley would never have a backpack so heavy with books. Stanley probably doesn't know how to read. Stanley is probably in reform school or prison. Shauna misses the young boys, friends of her sons and Liza Bear's boyfriends, who crowded her living room and kitchen, but not Stanley. She sits down at the desk, picks up the phone receiver, then sets it down again. It's too early to begin phoning clients. She counts the time difference on her fingers, lifts the receiver again to dial Oswego. Someone answers but there is only rustling, no voice for a few moments.

- Mom? Is that you? Are you there?
- Shauna, is that you?

Shauna relaxes. Her mother's voice sounds strong enough.

- Yes, mother. How are you feeling?
- Fine. I'm fine. Are you okay, honey?
- I'm fine.
- Really?
- Really, Mom.
- So why do you sound so worried, honey? How are the children?
- Fine, Mom, really, you're fine?
- Yes. I can't imagine what that was all about. And I don't believe the doctors, not a word of it.
- Believe them, Mom. Take your meds.

## Chapter 29

The next day Eliza sleeps late, or at least Shauna assumes she is sleeping late, as no sound is heard from behind the closed door. There is a dish left in the sink however, with some toast crumbs. Liza Bear must have stayed up late or crept into the kitchen in the middle of the night and made herself some toast. Shauna takes great comfort in this. She teased her daughter about becoming so thin she's almost see-through, but the opposite is the truth. She is becoming more opaque. The less there is of the child the more powerful she becomes, able to ruin Shauna's day simply by refusing lunch. Shauna wonders if black holes are made like this: a daughter becomes such concentrated energy that she disappears altogether and sucks in everything that comes close. Shauna wishes she had studied science rather than history. Her history project is all but abandoned anyway, as empty for her as the houses that she wrote up for the historical society pamphlets. It is ridiculous, this unwork she does. Her work is to fill homes with living people, not to preserve dead houses. She must consider getting back to work. She can't make any calls before nine a.m. and it is still dark out. Look at the clock. Seven thirty-five. An hour and a half is a very long time. Shauna makes a pot of coffee and before the water is finished dripping through the filter in the coffee maker she pulls out the carafe and pours herself a cup. This makes a mess, always, every morning, but she needs her mug of coffee before she can go into the office and switch on her computer.

She goes into her office and doesn't switch on her computer. Rather she stares out the window into the bleak marine layer that hangs over the



- I will, sweet daughter. Just so as not to worry you girls. And Theo? Did he arrive back in England safely?
- He's fine, I suppose, Mom, I'm calling . . .
- And Eliza?
- She's fine, Mother.
- Such a sweet girl. And you, dear? How's work?
- I'm still on the leave, Mother. It's been nearly a year.
- Yes, I know. I don't know how you do it.
- Mom, I was wondering, when we were down last year I took a photo from when I was a girl, and I was wondering if you could send me some others. Also, do you have any photos of Uncle Joe?
- Only from when he was very young, dear.
- He died young, Mom. Twenty, wasn't it?
- Yes, I think, twenty.
- Do you have some photos you could send me?
- They're all in the scrapbooks, I'm afraid.

Shauna takes the phone away from her face, puts her hand over her mouth. Breathe. Tries again.

- Could you send me some from the scrapbooks?
- Oh dear, they're all in order. It's so confusing when they're all loose. And William? How is William?
- He's fine, Mom.

- Have you heard from Theo? Is he coming home?
- Mom, the photos?
- Which photos, dear?

Shauna recognizes that it was a mistake to confuse the two issues, that of the photos from when she was young and the photos of Uncle Joe. Ask for two things and her mother gets baffled so Shauna gets nothing. She is trying to draw the family tree, rather like a game of connecting the dots, and Uncle Joe is one of the mysteries. Shauna was told once when she was little that he died in a car accident, then later that he died in his sleep. He'd always been a drinker. Well, not always but at least since he was fifteen, Shauna's mother had explained. Shauna can't remember who told her which of the two stories about his death. She thinks Aunt Hildie told her about the car accident and her mother had said he died in his sleep. Both stories were told to her when Shauna was very young and she wove the two together, surmising that he had fallen asleep drunk at the wheel and crashed his car. It helped that Shauna's mother was vague about details concerning Uncle Joe. Only after Shauna's own husband died, months after his car crash, did she make any enquiries at all. The only things she knows for certain about Uncle Joe is what she knows of him from photos, that he was a very long serious looking boy, something of Ted around the eyes, in the way he stood in front of the camera, always looking away. Both her boys, separated by two generations of time and a diluted gene pool, share that same gaze. Five years ago Alicia told Shauna that in fact Uncle Joe killed himself. Alicia had dug around for the details, had found a file, hospital records, along with the euphemistic notice in the local paper. It seems to run in the family, Alicia said, but has skipped a generation. Hopefully the gene pool is sufficiently diluted that this will stop now altogether, Shauna suggested. I hope so, Alicia said matter-of-factly. I think so, Shauna replied.

For several years Shauna seethed that her sister had kept this from her for so long. Now she wishes Alicia had taken the information to her grave.

Shauna also recognizes, thinking over the phone conversation with her mother that her mother did have a point, if it was indeed a point she was making; Shauna should go back to work. Next week it will be February and business will be picking up immediately following Valentine's Day.

There will be the spring boom. Shauna decides she will call her manager this morning.

She will fortify herself with a fresh pot of coffee. It was a mistake asking her mother for the photos of Uncle Joe. All Shauna needs are a few photos of herself as a young girl. Uncle Joe is not, after all, part of the fictional family photo album she is putting together; a coherent story told in Kodak snapshots and then digital prints. Or one of those collections of family photos under one frame that hung in several of her clients' homes. She'll never actually put such a book together, will hang such a collection in her front hall. She doesn't need the photo of Uncle Joe. She didn't even know him really, not ever. Uncle Joe was not even a dot she might connect to anything else if she was playing that child's game, connect the dots. He had gone missing before any of this story began to unfold, but the missing was what attracted her attention, part of the past that was not merely gone, that had never really been there at all. How long has it been, Shauna wondered, that she has missed the missing? How long since she had even given a thought to the thoughtless missing parts from which she emerged into the present, whole but with holes.

Where is Eliza? She said she was going to get up early. Shauna passes her daughter's bedroom door where a crack of light lights the hall. Eliza has her light on and is playing some music, a playlist she made for herself. Shauna stops by her daughter's bedroom to listen for a moment. Eliza is humming that show tune again:

*Start spreading the news  
I'm leaving today  
I want to be a part of it . . .*

Shauna makes her way back toward her own bedroom.

## Chapter 30

Shauna indeed begins working again, although certainly not with much enthusiasm. She starts slowly. At the end of that very week she went into the real estate office and spoke to Fred. Today she will go back in and take the phone at the front desk, try to pick up some new clients that way. She could call some of her old clients as well, although no one is likely to be moving this time of year. The market doesn't completely die in the dead of winter, a transplanted expression here where plants don't much die nor does the market, not as it does in the north, but Shauna wonders why everyone can't simply stay put for the time being. It's February. A time to break all one's New Year's resolutions.

The dead of winter. Shauna considers herself among the dead of winter, and this season has lasted too long. She must force herself the way back East she forced bulbs. How can she get herself to sit at the phone, to talk to strangers, to ask politely about their real estate needs, as if she gives a damn? Damn it, she doesn't but coffee might help. Also, an office. She decides she is going to start working in the real estate office with her colleagues.

Shauna takes an hour to dress, choosing her leather skirt and a green silk blouse with black hose, her green suede pumps. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, she pulls her hair straight back away from her face to look sophisticated and professional. She outlines her lips with a deep shade of burnished red, her eyes and brows with charcoal black. She moves slowly away from the mirror when Eliza emerges from her room. Eliza looks happy, happy to see her mother as if they never quarrelled.

- You look great, Mom. When will you be home?
- In time for dinner. You want me to bring take out?
- Take out what?
- Would you eat Korean?
- Sure, if it's veggie.
- And rice?
- Get some for yourself. I want kim chee. I love the kim chee. Make sure they don't forget to include it this time.
- I'll remind them, but you also need some carbohydrates, honey.
- Mother.
- Eliza.

Now it's settled. Shauna has to go out. Eliza expects it. Eliza expects to be alone in the house and Shauna must leave her alone. Yet they both walk down the upstairs hall, down the stairs toward the front door together.

- And where are you going, Eliza Bear?
- To the library. Do you need anything?
- What are you looking for?
- Oh, nothing. Just stuff.

Yesterday Eliza came home laden down with books, took them straight to her room. It is beneath Shauna to enquire. Shauna feels one's reading should be afforded more privacy than one's medical records and she extends that respect to her daughter's reading. But it is fair game to wonder what has kindled her daughter's curiosity such that she will venture out of the house

alone again two weeks in a row. Certainly she has already read everything there is online and in the public library pertaining to King Arthur and to Tennyson. Surely all these resources were exhausted some time ago.

As a matter of fact, Eliza also went out the day before just to pick up something at the drugstore. Shauna doesn't respect her daughter's privacy regarding purchases the way she does her reading, not since the Epsom salts argument, and examined the receipt left crumpled in the paper bag Eliza threw into the kitchen garbage pail. Eliza bought a soft drink and paper goods, no diuretics or laxatives that would have shown up on the receipt as anonymous drugs, nothing listed as pharmaceuticals. No Epsom salts. Eliza seems stronger and energized since her return from the Atlantic coast, often to be found working feverishly on a project in Shauna's office, on the computer, keeping the material she produces on a disk rather than on the hard drive so that Shauna has no idea what it is all about.

Eliza pulls on her black leather boots and finds her mother's heavy Russian sheepskin coat at the back of the closet. The coat is nearly as heavy as the girl.

- It's not that cold out, Eliza.
- I'm always cold and there's only about two days a year I can wear this coat and not feel ridiculous. I love it, Mom. You don't mind?
- I don't mind, but you might look ridiculous. Did your agent call?
- My agent never calls. I called her.
- So what's happening with the Shalott script, honey?
- Nothing. There was no money to make the film. Same old story. I don't care anymore.
- You don't?
- It's just one of those things. Development hell. Happens all the time. You know that.

- I do, but you worked so hard.
- Nothing is lost that's not forgotten. It was fun.
- So you aren't cross with her?
- I was, but not anymore. These things happen. You have to let it go. You should know that by now, Mom.
- I do. Well, I'm late now. See you later, honey.

Nothing is lost that is not forgotten. Shauna once said that to Eliza and now it comes back at her like an echo, but so much is forgotten. What else has been lost? So much, it seems.

It is late in the afternoon when Shauna, sitting at the front desk in the office, pulls up on the computer the listings of homes for sale in her area. There isn't much out there, but more than there was this time last year. She is exhausted considering all the work of resurrecting a client list, the open houses, the showings, the bids. Maybe she should have been a history teacher. Eliza is probably back home and surfing the web. Shauna imagines her daughter sitting at Shauna's own desk at home, the computer screen casting a green glow on her daughter's face as the sun begins to set. Eliza always bends toward the monitor as she works. She doesn't think to switch on the desk lamp as dusk settles in, but strains toward the light on the screen, oblivious. What can she be working on? She has written long emails to her brother in England, and posts messages on their respective Facebook sites. Shauna feels a little guilty that she herself has sent only two brief notes to Theo since his visit at Christmas to let him know how his grandmother was improving. What else is there to say? What is it that Eliza finds to write about?

Shauna pulls out the collection of Tennyson's poems that she had slipped into her briefcase, smuggled out of the house right under her daughter's nose. The calls are few and far between so she leaves the screen glowing and pushes back in her chair, opening the book to consider this character, Sir Lancelot. How Shauna despises him.

*A red-cross knight for ever kneel'd  
To a lady in his shield,  
That sparkled on the yellow field,  
Beside remote Shalott.*

Shauna has no difficulty imaging the landscape, more temperate than either upstate New York or Los Angeles with linden trees blossoming soon, wisteria vines thick as arms winding their way up arbours. Theo provided photos of the area, some he'd shot and some he collected to show Eliza. The fabled Camelot is presumed to be not far from where he is living in that drafty cottage near Tintagel, the resting place of King Arthur. The area seems barren in the photos, cold grey waves lapping against the stony shore, and only the narrowest beach. But one can imagine. Shauna had imagined fields of barley and groves of trees holding the morning mist with deer grazing, the fawns barely visible in the veil of haze, a hunter behind a tree at some distance. Eliza's face was ablaze picturing the court, the pageants and festivals on the green lawns and meadows soon blossoming, a river running through it. Eliza modelled the centrepiece for their Christmas dinner on King Arthur's castle, filled with meat and sweets so sticky the guests would have had to lick their fingers clean, suggestive of a young woman's perfect love, baked slowly and filled. But the meal centrepiece went into the freezer instead of onto the table. Now her focus has shifted. The lady remains more interesting than Lancelot who lived in that palace, and whom Eliza has never mentioned. The casting of the leading man usually absorbs Eliza's attention when she's going after a part, but not this time. He and whomever played the part were of no interest, nor was he interested in the lady who wove her dreams and images as she stared into the mirror to see the world. How had Eliza even maintained her fascination in the tale through the winter? The lady and Lancelot are of no inherent interest; they've all simply been framed, those who play the part and those in the original story. At least in the story of Lady Astolot she actually pined for her lover and he actually resisted. There was some energy there, even if he was repulsed by her ardour. Shauna can understand that, but about the Lady of Shalott Lancelot's not even curious. And she is far more interesting than he, Shauna concludes and closes the book. What was Tennyson on about?

The phone rings. A new client, then a cold call. Shauna is back. She has a client who is moving to Texas, a professor with a professional's home near the university. He needs to move by the end of the summer. This one

is easy. Shauna makes an appointment and returns the phone to its receiver. In an hour she will switch off the computer, and on her way home she will pick up some food at their favourite Korean restaurant, the usual, and ask them to include almond cookies as well as rice. Oh, and remind them about the kim chee. Maybe Eliza will eat the salted fish for protein.

## Chapter 31

Shauna looks across the table at her daughter who breaks apart two chopsticks and lifts a piece of pickled radish toward her mouth. Of course pickled radish contains no calories. Liza Bear's small hands and thin wrists barely manage the chop sticks. She must be no more than eighty pounds now, Shauna surmises, yet says nothing. The woman on the help-line told her not to speak about the weight loss directly, that this might only make matters worse. Nor should she push food on her daughter.

- You know, Mom, we still have tons of leftovers from Christmas in the freezer. I froze them in dinner-size portions so you can just throw something in the microwave. There's probably enough food for weeks, maybe months.
- Most of it's meat, though, honey.
- You eat meat.
- But you don't. I shop for both of us. Here, have some of this salted fish. It's rich in protein.
- You eat that; the bones are supposed to prevent osteoporosis in menopause.

- I'm not in menopause.
- You should start taking extra calcium a few years before, to prevent bone loss.
- How do you know this?
- I read, Mother. How do you not know this?
- What are you reading now?
- Mostly stuff about England. Theo sent me a bibliography. And Boroski and Spalding Grey's monologues. You remember his movie, *Swimming to Cambodia*. It was based on a book, and he'd written other books and performed them. All monologues. Well, now he's dead.
- We saw that movie together.
- That's right. He's the one.
- I didn't know he wrote books. How did he die?
- Drowned. Probably suicide. That's what he did. I mean, monologues. That is original. The dying isn't. Long monologues. It's amazing how they hold our interest.
- It's the story, I guess.
- It's him. He was brilliant. Whoopie Goldberg started out like that too. Did you know that? A one-person show on Broadway, doing her own monologues.
- No, I didn't know that.
- Hasn't done anything better since, they say. She was brilliant.
- Liza Bear, have some rice.

- Mom, I wish you'd stop it, and stop calling me that.
- Sorry.
- Doesn't matter.
- Did we get any mail?
- I got an email from Theo. He sends his love. And Grandma called.
- How is she?
- Fine. What did you expect? I'd have told you if she were dying.
- Eliza, that's not funny.
- Well, she's got to go sooner or later. That's one reason I don't want to move in with her. I thought about it, Mom. Really I did. After she got so sick at Christmas you didn't ask, but still I thought about offering. I mean I'm not doing anything here except studying, and for what? I just don't have the nerve. Can you imagine, being there alone when she dies? Or if she died and I didn't even know it. Gross. I might find her dead, like a day later.
- Won't you please eat a little rice? It's got practically no calories, and you need some carbs.

Eliza grabs an almond cookie and puts it between her teeth, grinning around the cookie to tease her mother, chomping down on it, chewing it thoroughly and swallowing.

- Mom, you're going to worry that I'll puke it up, ride the porcelain bus, hurl your precious carbohydrates. Relax, Mom. I'm over it.

## Chapter 32

Shauna reaches for some paper to put into the printer and finds that the ream of paper she bought earlier in the week is gone. She's been working at home, printing up a few listings, and wonders how Eliza used five-hundred sheets minus ten pages Shauna used for printing up those listings. Eliza sits by the window in the next room doing needlepoint.

- What is that you're working on, Eliza?
- Needlepoint.
- Well, I know it's needlepoint, but of what?
- A seascape, something for Theo. I designed it myself.
- When did you learn needlepoint?
- There are classes on youtube. And the woman who owns the yarn store, she knows nothing about tapestry but has a blog where she teaches needlepoint.
- She taught you needlepoint on her blog?
- Well, there's not much to teach.

- Did you use up all the computer paper?
- Oh, Mom. I'm sorry. I forgot to tell you. I'll replace it.
- What on earth were you printing up that's so long?
- Only one thing, but I had to make three copies.
- A photocopier can prove useful.
- I didn't want to have to go out.
- Why three copies?
- The Lady poems. Actually, I don't want to talk about it. But I'll buy you more paper.
- I can bring some home from the office. I was just wondering.

Shauna is still wondering, as Eliza leans over her needlepoint again, pulling a thread that has become knotted, pulling it with her teeth and groaning quietly. Shauna stares and knows Eliza knows she stares and Eliza knows she knows but they do not want to meet each other's eyes. Shauna simply wants to see what it is that her daughter is working on, and Eliza simply wants her mother to go away. Instead Shauna pushes the cushions away on the couch. She plops down onto it and sighs,

- I'm so tired.
- I thought you were going into the office today.
- I was going. I have to pick up some signs to do an open house for Emma. Her baby's sick. She didn't want to bring a baby to this house anyway, so maybe she's simply making excuses. It's open concept. The baby noises echo, especially now that all the furniture's gone.

Shauna hates this house too. It will be a relief when it sells. Unlike her own house with its wood floors covered with thick imported rugs

and old wooden furniture that absorbs sound as if it might save it for yet another century, the house for sale has been gutted and remodelled. Shauna appreciates modern design only in principle, stark lines and hard metal surfaces. In her own home she will have none of it. Eliza pulls another embroidery thread through her needle, a burnt orange.

- Eliza, do you ever think about your father?
- Sometimes. Do you think about yours?
- Not if I can help it. But your dad was a good man.
- I was so young, they are childish memories. I remember he looked like Theo does now, tall, dark. You know, the leading man.
- I don't see that in Theo. I don't think he looks much like your dad at all.
- Remember how Dad used to sing to me, make up songs and I would fill in the rhymes?
- I remember.
- Well, I still do that with him, like we're still playing that game together, only I guess I make up the whole rhyme and call it rap. What was grandpa like?
- Well, unlike your dad mostly absent. And my father didn't have such a good excuse. He remained alive.
- I remember him a little. You didn't cry when Grandpa died, at least not in front of us.
- Nor when your father died, at least not in front of you.
- I remember that, too.

Shauna pulls her legs up onto the couch and rolls over until her face is buried in a pillow.

- Mom, can I go with you to the open house?
- Why?
- It creeps me out, thinking of you in those big houses all alone, with strangers coming in. Do you have to go back to work? Do we really need the money?
- It's not something you should worry about.
- About money? I feel like such a loser, working so little.
- You're seventeen. And you just had a job. I'll do my job and you might consider finishing school.
- Still, let me hang out with you. That house is the one with the big front windows. I could work there. I need more light.

So they will go together. Shauna rises to her full height and towers over her daughter who bends down to wind her threads and puts the needlepoint in a brown paper bag.

Along the way they buy some calla lilies to place in a vase on the table at the open house, and a loaf of frozen bread to bake in the oven, a real estate cliché because it works. The smell of fresh baked bread will fill the house that is totally open, with heavy wood risers suspended on centre beams like cantilevers from the basement up to the third floor.

- I could fart in the basement and someone will smell it in the attic.
- Please don't test that theory, Eliza Bear.

Eliza takes her place by the west facing window that goes nearly all the way up from the floor to ceiling. There she sits all afternoon, and makes a lovely picture as people wander through, three couples and one single woman in the course of the entire open house. Shauna has them write their names on a sheet of paper and gives each one her business card. Eliza sits there doing her needlepoint. As the late afternoon light turns to orange streaks, Shauna switches on a light and Eliza continues drawing the threads



through, front to back, creating a shoreline on the fabric, until Shauna is ready to go home.

A small packet from Oswego sits on the floor by the mail slot and Shauna nearly trips on it coming in, Eliza Bear circling around her and heading for her room. When Shauna rips open the envelope photos spill onto the floor in the hall. She gathers them up, takes them into the kitchen, and sets herself down on a chair to carefully arrange them on the counter top. There are no pictures of Uncle Joe, just a few more family portraits like the one she stole from the photo album, the one taken for their Christmas card where Shauna is six years old, a big smile showing missing teeth. Alicia stands over her to the left near her mother's knee. Her mother looks calm and sophisticated in a cashmere sweater, a string of white pearls, and a wide skirt, fashionable in the early sixties. Shauna remembers hiding beneath that skirt, looking up at her mother as if she were a giant umbrella blocking out the sun. The photo was taken before her mother's eyes became hollowed out. After that no one took any pictures; it is as if the family didn't want to remember anything, or at least didn't want to leave a record of what they remember. There aren't anymore photos until those of Shauna's wedding. Shauna's memory fails her. She was there. She ought to remember what happened in the intervening year. Shock. Stop. Alicia had explained it over and again, what happened must have happened shortly after this Christmas card photo was taken. The treatments, she says, did this to their mother's eyes. Something happened to their mother as if their mother had nothing to do with it, and treatment for what? You know, Alicia said, but Shauna didn't know. But you were right there Alicia insisted. Yes, but I was very young, Shauna replied. And there are no family photos of this, no guideposts except from the time before and then fast forward to Shauna's wedding. Shauna doesn't trust her memories anyway. Does she actually remember anything, or merely has memories of trying to remember?

Shauna's father looks proud sitting next to his wife in the stuffed leather chair, surrounded by his family. It is a classic portrait, an updated American Gothic. Posed. Composed. Shauna stares at the photos, trying to think behind them. She wishes there were some more of Uncle Joe, and of what came after, her own high school prom, her friends from gym camp, but there are none of him or them, and squinting, trying to remember their faces, all she can remember is herself looking at them, tumbling with them, and she can hardly remember that.

Would she have actually worn that same string of pearls for her wedding? Oh yes, something borrowed, and she is wearing them as if this was the most natural thing to do. Then Shauna with her too soon dead husband, Ted. Shauna staring at the young man, his arm resting on the shoulder of his new bride, as if he's planning to be there for good. To be fair to him, he was planning to be there for a long time. Had Shauna ever been so innocent, so unpregnant, so unemployed, so wistfully looking forward to a honeymoon, her bag packed? She is blushing when Liza Bear comes into the room.

- Anything for me?
- No, honey.
- I'm expecting a package from Theo.
- Oh?
- What do you have there?
- Some photos Grandma sent. I forgot I'd asked her, but these aren't the photos I wanted.
- Can I see?
- Sure.
- Mom, what a scream. You actually were young once. And look at Dad there. Wow!

Liza Bear doesn't even wince at the photo of her dad, Shauna notices, studying her daughter's face. She just laughs, passes the photos back to her mother, goes back into the kitchen, puts the kettle on the stove, turns on the gas, and hums the same damn tune that she's been carrying for months it seems to Shauna:

*I'm going to wake up in the city that never sleeps  
In 'ol New York, New York, New York!*

## Chapter 33

Shauna actually sells a house, not the open concept home but another house, and Eliza finishes the needlepoint that she designed for Theo. She stands again by the kitchen table, stretching the canvas of a stylized woodland that reminds Shauna of the Waterhouse paintings in its palette but William Morris in its design, the winding tendrils of his Pimpernel Wallpaper, and in the background barely a hint of the monstrous castle shooting up out of rock. Eliza places the canvas in a wooden frame. The mailing box she has purchased gapes open beside her.

- Mom, is there anything you want to put into the box to send along. There's room for a little something.
- For cookies?
- Only if you wrap them very carefully. I don't want crumbs or grease to ruin the art.
- Of course not. I'll send them separately next week.

Shauna retreats to her bedroom to get dressed. Eliza, Shauna notices, has stopped losing weight, or so it seems, but now Shauna notices as she puts on her leather skirt that the waist is loose. A belt will cover it, but a faint worry lodges itself in her mind. She isn't trying to lose weight. She

hasn't stopped eating, nor has Eliza started to eat more, at least not so much that Shauna notices but it is as if there is an equilibrium between them, a fixed area that they occupy between them and it's Shauna's turn to carry the loss. She has always been lean, thus it is a real deficit, these pounds that seem to dropping off for no good reason.

It is already almost spring. Her newest listing will show best in the spring, when the whole neighbourhood comes into bloom with jacaranda trees arcing over the road and raining blue petals, fragrant Easter lilies big as dinner plates shooting up next to flamboyant orange and blue birds of paradise flowers. The bare tree branches that look like skeletons reaching out in March become graceful as ballerina's arms, best in the late afternoon light so Shauna schedules the showing for 4:30. And they'll take their time at the house to avoid the worst traffic.

She drives up to the house and unlocks the front door to let herself in. The house is empty. Shauna can't do many tricks. When the sellers remain in the house she encourages them to brew fresh coffee, or she herself pops toast in the toaster and puts flowers on a table, making the house whisper 'life is good here'. She moves from room to room in the empty house. There is nothing she can do to brighten the place. It is already too bright, barren white walls now that they've moved. She must rent framed posters, an oversized arm chair to set next to the Victorian side table in the front room, a place to do business, the business of selling this house. Shauna thinks about all this too late, fifteen minutes after the couple are meant to show up. Where are they? Shauna wonders and flips open her cell phone to check messages. She will be losing the light in another half-hour.

It passes, and Shauna slides down a wall to sit on the hard wood floor in the living room, next to the fireplace. Even the noise of her leather skirt meeting the wood resounds as she reaches the floor and examines her stockinged legs bent before her. Her calves—she is definitely losing weight and it shows in her calves, usually a source of vain pride but now they seem gaunt to her. She puts her head down against her knees. Perhaps she falls asleep. Perhaps it is merely a dream, the sound of a creaking door, the sound of a rat scurrying across the upstairs hall. In any case, when she raises her head again the room is dark. A shaft of light shines through the window from the street light outdoors, casting a white pillar of light on the far wall of the living room. Shauna tests her legs that have fallen asleep, and she rises on them, unsteady. They seem as if they might give way beneath her as she gropes toward the light switch, switches it on but to no effect. The bulb must be burnt out. She staggers toward the hall to

try that switch. The front hall suddenly floods with light. She thinks she should go upstairs and check to see if there is indeed a vermin that must be exterminated. Otherwise it might leave droppings that will be evident in the next showing. She begins to climb the stairs but freezes. She can neither climb up further nor retreat, and stands paralysed on the third step, stands there listening. No sound. Not even street sounds. No sound at all. Only her own breath, or maybe even it is the sound of her heartbeat that gives the house this throbbing sound. She stands still. She waits.

Eventually the furnace switches on and its quiet rumble fills the house and releases Shauna's legs so that she can hurry down the three stairs, reaching around to the thermostat on the other side of the vestibule wall in the living room to turn it down. She grabs her briefcase and escapes through the front door, slamming it shut, locking it behind her.

## Chapter 34

- Mom, is that you? Your office called. It's a no show with those clients. They decided it is too expensive. Did they reach you?
- No.
- Mom, you look like you've seen a ghost.
- A rat, really.
- What happened? Here, let me take your coat.
- Leave me alone, please, Eliza. I'm going to bed.
- What about dinner?
- Take something out of the freezer.

Shauna hands Eliza her coat as she kicks off her wet shoes and hurries upstairs, strips off her skirt, her blouse, her hose and her bra, and slips under the covers. The sheets are cold against her bare skin at first. She lies there looking up at the ceiling. In a few minutes Eliza is at the door knocking softly.

- Are you okay, Mom?
- I'm fine, honey. Maybe a bit of a fever. I think I just need some sleep.
- Well, good night, Mom. Call me if you need anything, if you want me to bring you some tea or something to eat, anything.
- Thanks, honey.

Perhaps it is a fever. Her dreams are like fever dreams. She is pregnant again and the foetus keeps growing and will not be born. She grows, slowly grows, so slowly that at first everything seems normal, the stretching so slow as to be almost imperceptible, and no one else seems to notice either, not William nor Theo nor Eliza who float in or out of the dream, or maybe they are too polite to mention it. Shauna is not expecting the baby be born anymore. It will have to be a second trimester abortion, by saline, salty as tears, the doctor says to no one, and finally adds,

- Did I say second trimester? I meant second decade and even the Pope thinks abortion is okay in cases where the mother's life is at risk.

Shauna is left alone wandering through an empty house, empty of furniture. She wakes up drenched in perspiration yet again. Perhaps it is a fever rather than menopause, she thinks, a good excuse to remain in bed all day.

Eliza has signed up for a tapestry workshop in the textile studio at LACMA so Shauna will be alone most of the weekend. In the morning she wanders through the house, makes a large pot of herbal tea for herself for fear she has become dehydrated. Perhaps that is all, not a fever but these night sweats that have left her weak and fill her dreams with ugly scenes. She returns to her bed, dreams of Theo's wedding night. Shauna sees a man in their backyard rummaging through garbage next to the garage, plastic wine glasses and plates smeared with wedding cake crumbs and rich white icing. The man is shouting obscenities, that he used to live here and now he is furious that she would throw his stuff away. He sets fire to their garage, and Shauna wakes up frightened until she remembers she doesn't have a garage. She falls back asleep, back into the arms of this madman and

dreams that he accepts her explanation, an apology really, and she accepts his blessing.

- Mom, are you asleep?
- No, well yes, but I'm waking up. What time is it?
- Nearly eight o'clock.
- In the morning?
- No, at night.
- I must have slept all day. What day is it?
- Saturday. You didn't have an open house?
- No, but tomorrow I do.
- I'll make us some dinner, Mom. Are you okay?
- I think I'm coming down with something.
- Could you take some soup?
- Thanks, honey. I think I could hold soup down.

When Shauna does get to her feet, pulls on a robe and crawls into the bathroom to splash water on her face, she begins to feel better. She stares into the mirror and notices only the fine lines around her eyes, the grey pallor of her face. She goes down into the kitchen, following the scent of Eliza's boiling broth, and enters to find Eliza enthusiastic about the small tapestry loom she has strung and the threads she has pulled through, far brighter than the medieval tapestries Shauna imagines.

- See, Mother, I'm doing the shapes of a city skyline but it is abstracted. You taught me something after all, not to be so literal. No one will know what they are seeing but they will see cities differently later. At least that's the idea.

- It's a good one.
- Thanks, Mom, but what do you know about tapestry?
- Next to nothing, that's true.
- I'm just learning this so I can do it on stage. When I play the lady.
- On stage? You hate the stage. I thought it was a movie.
- Oh, yes, I didn't tell you.
- Well, tell me now.
- No. You need to eat something. Let me pour you some soup.

After they finish their soup Shauna goes back to bed with a book of Gerald Manley Hopkins' letters. She finds his letters about Tennyson but falls asleep before reading them, falls back asleep and the book falls to the floor. If she dreams she does not remember the dream. They do not wake her; only the wet of her soaked nightgown wakes her and she strips it off, crawls in naked between the cold damp sheets and falls back into sleep.

Eliza has already left the house again by the time Shauna wakes the next morning. Eliza gathered her embroidery floss, has wound the floss around treadles of cardboard and stuffed them into a sack she will carry down to the waterfront where she will weave her tapestry, her dream city that Shauna can only imagine. Shauna tries to imagine, to imagine her daughter overlooking the dark water on the winter beach. Today she will continue working on this tapestry, Shauna imagines; she will hardly speak at all. She must work for days and days to complete it, this slow work, and Shauna must stop imagining this slow time, must rise and get herself over to the bitter divorced people's house to hold the open house, to try to get the price that these people want. It's always the same. She puts on the same skirt she wore on Friday and the waistband seems even looser now. Of course, she thinks, with the fever she must have become dehydrated

despite the tea. One can't lose weight lying in bed all day, just water and the salt she can taste on her skin that has seeped out of her pores. She must shower first and dress, then get back to the house and inspect the place for evidence of the rat.

## Chapter 35

They pass each other in various rooms around the house all week, Eliza and Shauna, speaking seldom. Eliza is intent on her tapestry weaving. She borrowed the loom and must return it soon. Eventually she will buy her own, she tells Shauna, but one can't simply change looms midway in tapestry. The loom holds the threads and is therefore one with the work itself, providing the frame, the tension. Sometimes during the week Shauna enters the living room where Eliza is working and Eliza doesn't even look up, doesn't seem to notice at all. Shauna moves about, takes down a photo album from the bookcase to insert the photos her mother sent, to place them there among the others she has collected. What is the expression on the lady's face? Shauna wonders, but she cannot see Eliza's face that is bent toward her work and she cannot imagine the lady's if it is not Eliza's because Tennyson gives so few clues.

The rat house is still not selling. Shauna has several listings now and there is a bid in on one house, the deal very likely to go through this week, but there are no offers on the empty house and the owners are blaming her. Shauna knows she is not to blame. The house is simply overpriced. She suggests that they can seek out another agent, one they feel might do better. Let the next agent give them the bad news, Shauna decides. And let the next agent deal with the rat. She herself needs the commission but not the fight, and she won't get a commission without a fight. Should she mention the rat? she wonders. But she is not completely convinced there is a rat. Perhaps it was only in her imagination that she heard it. She has been

back to the house several times. She has shown it twice, wandered through inspecting it and once she thinks that she even saw the rat's tail, a bare brown rope twitching behind the refrigerator, but she found no droppings. She never finds droppings.

She will place calls to several other clients and tell them about the listing. The owners will be at work now, so she can just leave a message on their answering machines. She will compose an uplifting message. She will repeat the same message several times, though personalizing it on every client's answering machine. Luckily none of her clients know one another.

The character of Lancelot figures more largely in the third section of Tennyson's poem than does the lady. Tennyson describes the knight's gestures, as well accessorized as is his horse, a job Tennyson must have enjoyed, bedecking the man and horse with jewels and feathers, the thick-jewelled saddle-leather, Lancelot wearing a helmet with a feather plume. Lancelot's face is described in details totally lacking in Tennyson's description of the lady, who is hardly less shadowy than the shadows she weaves. Lancelot has a broad clear brow, coal black curls. What colour is the lady's hair? Shauna imagines it is the colour of Eliza's hair. And because she is so young her brow is clear of wrinkles except when she worries, and she doesn't worry often because she is so young. She sits by her loom, weaving shadows reflected by the mirror.

Shauna's feeling optimistic when the mail arrives, when she hears the mailman's footfall on the front porch, hears the brass cover to the mail slot, hears Eliza leap out of her chair by the window where she's weaving, hears Eliza rush to the door and finds her there, her face flushed, holding a fat manila envelope studded with blue and green stamps, English. Shauna asks,

- What's that you have?
- My package from Theo. I've been waiting all week.
- What are you expecting?

Eliza flashes a mischievous grin. She pulls herself up as tall as she can, barely five feet but even at that short height she can make herself seem elegant and aloof. Only her childlike expressions betray her.

- It's for me to know and you to find out.

- Is there anything for me?
- Let me see here.

Eliza leafs through the rest of the pile she holds in her arms, indifferent.

- Just bills.

She nonchalantly hands Shauna the stack of business envelopes and returns to the living room clutching her package from Theo, Shauna following behind her.

Back in her window seat Eliza rips open the large fat envelope and pulls out what looks to Shauna to be a manuscript, a stack of typing paper, perhaps eighty sheets or more, with some scribbling in pen along the margins. Shauna moves into the living room and pretends to look through her own mail while Eliza reads carefully, intent upon every page but apparently familiar enough with the text that she can read through it quite quickly. The sheaf of papers she is flipping reminds Shauna of the flip books that Liza Bear and Theo used to make together as children, creating characters that scampered across the page as they flipped through the successive cartoon images they spent hours drawing, that produced the appearance of movement like their television cartoons produced it. A few years later Theo and Eliza would spend as much time making fornicating flip books, cartoons of penises entering bottles and vulva. These they hid from Shauna at first, but she found them out and remained light hearted. Light fingered, Theo insisted. You stole them from us, he accused her years later.

But the flip books never alarmed Shauna as she is alarmed now, watching Eliza's face turn from pleasure to stress flipping the pages of the script. Eliza sighs deeply inspecting one passage carefully, and in the next moment a smirk crosses her face, and then again she shows some pain. Shauna feigns interest in an imaginary spot on the upholstery, goes into the kitchen for a sponge, feigns cleaning the spot with the damp sponge, glances at the flyer of grocery coupons and pretends to inspect them, but it is her daughter's face she is studying, Eliza apparently oblivious to her mother's gaze. Eliza begins at the beginning again, turning back to the first page and reads through the entire sheaf of papers once again. Now her face is impassive, analytic, and Shauna's eyes drop to the ground toward Eliza's tapestry and the threads that are littered around her chair.

- Argh!

Eliza's groan fills the room, and she jumps to her feet.

- Mom, I need to use the office and your computer this afternoon. I have to print a bunch of stuff up. Is that okay?
- Well, I have a house showing anyway. But consider the trees, Eliza. What do you need with all these copies?
- I've got to do it. I will. Did you bring home more computer paper?
- It's on the bottom shelf next to the desk.
- Okay. I'll do it.

Eliza races toward the staircase, still holding the manuscript, taking the stairs three at a time until she reaches the top. Shauna hears her footsteps running down the hall toward her bedroom, hears the door slam shut, and the lock is turned.

*She left the web, she left the loom,  
 She made three paces thro' the room,  
 She saw the water-lily bloom,  
 She saw the helmet and the plume,  
 She look'd down to Camelot.  
 Out flew the web and floated wide;  
 The mirror crack'd from side to side;  
 "The curse is come upon me," cried  
 The Lady of Shalott.*

# **Part IV**



*In the stormy east-wind straining  
The pale yellow woods were waning  
The broad stream in his banks complaining  
Heavily the low sky raining  
Over tower'd Camelot;  
Down she came and found a boat  
Beneath a willow left afloat  
And round about the prow she wrote  
The Lady of Shalott*

## Chapter 36

The name *The Lady of Shalott* is printed on the script right above Eliza's own name, and a copy of the script remains in the house, but the child is gone. The good daughter is gone. It was a plot Theo and Eliza hatched over the winter holidays. Eliza would finish writing the script; he would collaborate. Plots, collaborators, it all sounds like an action movie, a thriller. Shauna is not thrilled. She's not amused. Shauna understands that Theo is not Eliza's Lancelot but her mirror, distorting the image so that she feels as large as her brother although she is only five feet, thin as him but she does not see the waif she is. Shauna understands what's been going on now that it is too late. Liza Bear is gone. She's doing a rock opera in New York, off off Broadway. Off off off Broadway, but there is a producer. A drug addict in New York offered her a showcase for this work at Electric Theatre. They just need a band. Eliza explained it all in the note she left Shauna, except she omitted, of course, the addiction. Shauna made that part up herself. Liza Bear's manager okayed it. Liza Bear's manager calls it a heart project. Liza Bear's manager has her right where she wants her—in New York.

Shauna phones William. He tells her she can call the cops, that he'll call the cops, but the wheels of justice creak if they move at all and she is nearly eighteen years old. The police are dealing with twelve-year-olds being molested by their step-parents. Mom, you have to understand their point of view. It's basically social triage, he tells her.

- But she can't perform without my permission.
- She's not going to admit she's underage, Mother.
- But she's got a manager. She's with SAG.
- Assuming she admits it. Assuming she's even using her real name.

Shauna cannot reach Theo on the phone. He has no phone now. She sends an email, posts a message on his facebook page, and scratches out an angry letter she will send by snail mail. He was writing poetry on the coast where King Arthur died, and in Eliza's imagination Camelot spreads out at his feet. But he would not venture out there. He stayed warm in his cottage by a fire, wrapped in the sweater Eliza knit him, writing lines to embellish Eliza's script, a monologue for the lady. It is her body, her voice, her trip down the river. He did not recognize the danger because he is not endangered. Eliza is. Evidently Eliza emailed Theo who responded,

- Go!

And now she is gone. The daughter who lived in a lake in Shauna's abdomen. The water gushed out and then she did. Now the daughter is living and working in New York.

Shauna's answer from Theo comes late the next week.

February 26

Dear Mother,  
 Let her live.  
 Love,  
 Theo

Eliza is almost eighteen years old. It is common for young people to leave as soon as they are able. It happens. So what? The placenta separates. The lake fills with new water. But is the lake the container or the water that is contained? Shauna takes to her bed and doesn't rise except to make tea for three days. She dreams of water and every morning wakes up in a virtual pool of her own perspiration.

Finally she enters her office and throws out everything in her files that pertain to her history projects. She is done with history. She takes down her messages. Someone makes an offer on the empty house, unaware of the rat.

What Shauna recognizes, wandering through her own silent cave-dwelling, is that either this house is too big or Shauna's life is too small. There is a lack of proportion, an imbalance of weight, a weight a wait await. She chants now.

And she cleans everything, reversing her old cleaning habits. She begins with the bathroom, sorts and finds near-empty bottles of shampoo, creams, sun lotion, above the commode, under the sink, on the ledge by the tub. This used to drive her mad about Liza Bear, how the girl never threw anything away. Now Shauna mourns each empty bottle she tosses into the garbage pail. She keeps cleaning. She moves out of the bathroom, scrubbing the wooden floor in the hall. She realizes this is the opposite of her usual cleaning pattern, that usually she works her way into the bathroom, finally to powder the shower stall with cleanser, wash the tub and climb in, finally washing herself. To start such a cleaning spree in the bathroom, and moving out from there, where will this lead?

Down the hall, into her bedroom. She strips the bed and throws the sheets out into the hall. She dusts the dresser, scoops away cobwebs that hang in the corners from the ceiling. Later she will vacuum through. Back into the hall, a quick swish of the dust rag in the guest room, and slowly she moves into Eliza's room. It is cluttered despite all the paraphernalia she took with her. There are used tissues on her dresser by the mirror, smeared with her lipstick as she blotted. Shauna picks up a tissue, touches the red spots and the soft dryness where her daughter's lips were pressed. The tissue quivers. Into the garbage. She runs down and gets a large black garbage bag. There is going to be so much to throw out. Back into the bathroom with the bag, she empties the garbage of the bottles that rattle as they tumble to the bottom.

Now Shauna is going to get down to work. She has listings to review. She has to return the call from those people who want to make an offer. She brings their number up on her computer and fastidiously begins transferring all the names from the list she obtained at the open houses. She will later call these names, fill out the data forms that encapsulate people's desires, distilled to the bare essentials, location, size of family unit, whether or not they have prearranged mortgages. She turns away from the



heat. Like the Florida pygmy rattler she read about in National Geographic, she waits. When food, a rat perhaps, comes within striking distance she will strike and, if quick and lucky, she will eat. At all other times she must rest. She won't need much, a warm rock, a rat if it comes her way. Shauna remembers the pictures of foetal development that she studied when the babies were to be born, as they passed from reptile to human, losing their gills by the third month, but a lizard's memory must remain.

## Chapter 37

Eliza phones her mother regularly, or Shauna phones her. Shauna speaks as if she is busy with all this cleaning and the open houses. There is no truth in this and Eliza knows it.

- How is your garden, Mother?
- Fantastic, dear. The lilacs are barely blossomed but it is still March. The rainy season is over I think. We can't expect much more rain, and there wasn't much in December, so there is concern. Not much. We had those fires in January, for God's sake, remember? But it turns out . . . well, never mind. They are worrying about mudslides again, because of the fires and now the rain. You know what it's like, always something.
- The weather is warming here. There are some blossoms.
- That must be lovely, Eliza. Do you really want to talk about the weather?
- And William? How is he?
- Fine.

- I got another letter from Theo. He may be in love, Mother. Did he tell you about Helen?
- No. And you? Are you in love? Is Stanley with you there?
- What are you doing with yourself, Mother?
- Tell me what you are up to, Liza Bear. How is everything?
- We're in rehearsals for the play, Mom. I hate it. They're all so pretentious. You can't do hip-hop like you're some fucking precious artist.

Shauna can't get used to Eliza's language. Eliza can't get used to her mother's inability to adjust to this expansive vocabulary, so there is a beat, a silence.

- Are you eating well? Do you carry your rape whistle? Does your building have an alarm system? Do you need anything?
- I've got a day job. That's what I needed to get by for now and I got one right away. It's perfect really.
- Would you like to come home?

Eliza gets quiet again. She doesn't tell Shauna to lighten up, that she is fine. She doesn't tell Shauna anything. All she says is

- Mom, I've got to go.

Shauna lies down and takes a nap with Shakespeare's sonnets open at the side of her bed, and she thinks of Liza Bear.

Eliza, your leaving makes little difference to Shauna's life except at first, before Shauna learns to conjure you back, to argue and converse with you as before. If anything it is more intimate now. She can praise or press you now, demand more precision of your opinions. "I see where that might lead but can you prove it?" she might ask you, to which you sink or rise. See?

She does better with you without you. Even her senses have become more acute. She's grown antennae. Vibrations indicate your ghostly presence across three time zones. They measure your heart rate. You are calm now, but earlier this evening you were agitated. She knows. She feels everything, the pattern of the wool blanket against her bare legs. Wherever you are, you turn in your sleep, waking her up. As for her, she is crying, that she is really sorry.

It has been almost a month, Shauna thinks, waking and wiping the sleep from her eyes. She thinks she thinks. There are no words, merely impressions of time. Is that thought? She thinks not. It's been a month. She has not just thought for a month. There is laundry. There are houses. There are many things contained in a month. She thinks an impression of her daughter's bare baby's body rubbing her breasts, the tiny mouth taking in the milk, taking away her breath. She thinks it has been a month. Life is not simply memory. She thinks maybe in another month she will think other thoughts.

Eliza is teaching her how to come apart without jerking, this daughter's act of separating from herself first, later from her mother, as if dancing. Years from now Shauna might take a lover who will ask,

- How do you do that, like a gymnast but so graceful?
- I learned this from my daughter.

Eliza is far away, both mother and child grateful to their unlucky stars that they are left alone, free, she from her and her from her.

William remains most worried. He calls Shauna up almost daily, now encouraging her: has she considered calling the authorities? Eliza is still a minor.

- And you, Mom, I'm worried about you. You say you're fine but I can hear it in your voice.

He changes the subject but not really. He wants Shauna to see her doctor.

- But I am fine.

She tells him she has made a sale. She has made breakfast. She pours a mug of coffee as they speak and when they hang up she sits down to work. In just one day she made six calls, made a bid, paid all the bills, and wrote a 'to do' list. Was that yesterday? This is all for the good.

## Chapter 38

Eliza calls and tells Shauna about her babysitting job that pays part of the rent. Eliza sits there on the other end of the phone line and tells her mother that she's babysitting the neighbour's son, just until the show opens, because babysitting doesn't pay enough.

- But I still have some savings, Mom.
- You tell me if you need any money, won't you?
- Mother, I don't intend to get myself into a bad situation.
- No one ever does, dear. Tell me if you need anything.

What Eliza tells her mother in great detail is this other mother's story, simply, not to exaggerate anything and not to make the mother and Harry out as if they are poor drudges. A lot of people are richer but a lot of people are poorer, about half and half, Eliza explains. She knows about these things, now that she's seen something of the world on her own.

- Look at those dreadful pictures of people in Darfur, but you don't have to go that far. Just step out the door here and you see people with absolutely nothing except the greasy clothes they're wearing.

- Are they destitute? How does she pay you?
- Hell, no. Harry and his mom aren't like that. They do just fine and Harry always has everything he needs, good food, okay clothes. Nothing fancy but Harry isn't so particular. The pizza here is great. There is a place right around the corner on Second Avenue makes fine pizza with lots of vegetable topping.
- Are you eating pizza?
- Sure, sometimes. And there's this great store where we shop for everything cheap, clothes, jeans and cotton shirts. Cotton. That is the one thing Harry is a bit fussy about. He likes the feel of real cotton, calls polyester shirts sticky. How cute is that? But cotton isn't so easy to come by in the thrift shops. Sometimes we find Hawaiian shirts for him. I love those on him. He's okay if I buy them but not if his mom does, so sometimes she wanders all the way over to where Canal Street runs into Chinatown. You can get new cotton shirts cheap around there, and dinner too, noodles, a break from the regular pizza fare.
- Do you go out with them often?
- Sometimes. Last night we all went out, not to buy anything. I'm being careful with money, Mom, and I don't want to mooch from a single mom, for God's sake. So we went to Washington Square and hung around.
- Do you have enough money? I can send you more.
- I'm fine. Relax.
- I don't like that neighbourhood. It's quite poor.
- Well, we certainly don't go without much. Susan spends whatever is needed for Harry's education including a computer that she lets me use. And she never scrimps on safety. She's got bars for the windows and a good crib from when he was little. Now they use it as a huge laundry hamper. Susan hates

- doing laundry until it is really piled high. But she cares about the important things. It shows. She knew all about lead paint. There's no lead paint on that crib or anywhere in the apartment. She had everything tested. She is a good provider. Mother. Are you still there?
- Sure, honey. I'm making a cup of tea.
- Just checking. See, it's a point of pride with her. Not that Susan is a drudge either, as if she is working all the time to provide for herself and her son. Susan is no drudge. Could we pretend we're having some tea together, Mom?
- Sure.
- Well, don't hang up. I'll put my kettle on, okay?
- I'm pouring mine now.
- Good. Mine will just take a minute. Now what were we talking about?
- Harry's education.
- Oh sure. See, Susan works hard enough and no harder. She's happy to have just enough work to pay the bills, but it has to be right there in the neighbourhood so she can keep an eye on Harry. He's already almost too old for babysitters. I would say he was too old just after he started talking. Mom, this kid reminds me of Theo. He didn't start talking until he was almost four. He was a silent watcher for a long time, Susan says. And eventually he started right out talking in full sentences. Reminds me a bit about what you said Theo was like as a kid. Harry asks questions using big words, like, "Since most frogs' predators are diurnal and the frog is nocturnal, does that give the advantage to the frog or the predators?" No one answers him because we usually get distracted before he gets to the end of his question. Where the hell, in Alphabet City, does a kid pick up the word 'diurnal'?

- Who knows how kids learn anything.
- Well, that's how I met Susan in the first place, through Harry. I think that's how she's meets most of the people she hangs with these days. I asked her how Harry acquired such a weird vocabulary when I was sitting out on the stump talking with him. He was going on about frogs again, and Susan had come home late. Their babysitter just quit. I've been the babysitter ever since.
- What do you do with him when you're rehearsing?
- He's an easy kid, and usually it's only nights I'm with him, but sometimes Harry goes to rehearsals with me.
- How's your tea, honey?
- It's peppermint, Mom. Perfect.

They both hang up when they've drained their cups.

## Chapter 39

After this last call Shauna spends a week walking about the neighbourhood alone and returns home to work on a letter she composes for Eliza. She writes it first on her computer. At dusk she walks some more, then writes some more. In the end she prints it up, finally copying it in her own hand onto parchment stationary. Shauna sends the letter she's written in her own hand, a letter from spring to Eliza:

Eliza,

You didn't ask and I didn't think to mention where I went this weekend. It was the feast, that annual affair held out in the country northeast of here. At the first sign of spring we get together, dress for the weather and drink rose hips to keep warm.

I arrived the night before the feast, as did many of the guests. (Merlin sends his regards.) They played their music and danced until late but, tired from a difficult winter, I retired early and listened to the bass notes beating up through the floor. I'd been given the prettiest room with warm pine floors and peach coloured wallpaper speckled with fleur-de-lis. My host made up my bed, small as a child's, with heavy quilts. I slept well for the crisp wet air.



At the sight of snow in the early morning my heart sank, but the snow melted by noon and the feast was on. The meal is held in a courtyard open to the air, set on the highest hill in the area. From up there you think you can see everything.

The table was set. Let me tell you, it is always lovely. The clothes are lace and linen and there are vases filled with lilies, ferns, tulips and freesia, the most bittersweet smell of all. China we use sparingly, knowing that it breaks like promises and can't be repaired so as not to show the cracks. We are careful. You remember? We serve the children on silver and gold.

We are all platters and serving spoons. Myself, I'm a goblet. Emptied over the winter, I finally learned to appreciate the fine striations on its interior surface. But now the cup is filled with wine like a miracle. Take a sip, I tell my friends. Just don't drain the cup; there's a few bitter flecks settled on the bottom.

But then who is who and what is what here? We don't ask. We accept only what information is freely offered in conversation. We consider this our good manners, respecting one another's privacy. People do chatter but never about each other. Eventually most everything is known and together we make a gorgeous feast.

The bread is set out. Good bread must be baked nearly every day if it is to be served fresh, and ours is fresh. Whatever is left at dusk we feed to the birds. The butter keeps longer and is spread soft and thick. The fruit, that is my favourite part. When the venison is set out on the table it leaps up off the platter and dashes into the woods. That was a joke; we are all vegetarians here.

Nibbling on nuts for protein, serving up wild rice with lemon. The proper mix of foods is part sweet, part bitter, some light as salad and some as substantial as a baked potato. Everyone takes their choice and nothing is wasted.

Come nightfall, we study the stars. In the spring sky you see Aeria. Taurus, the bull, is setting and Leo, the king, is high. Virgo you can hardly see at all but you can't miss Venus, so bright it seems as if she is a candle lit in the centrepiece.

Now it is late and we kiss each other goodbye. Except those with children, everyone leaves alone. No one mourns the departures; the leave-taking is part of the ceremony.

So this is it. The feast ends with grace. And as sure as the weather, it will come around every year at this time

Love, Mom.

Eliza's response arrives within a week, an email:

Dear Mother,

I'm fine. Sounds like you're feeling better, but if you're still worried and if it will help, then send money.

Better yet, come down for a visit (and bring money!)

Love,

Eliza

*Who is this? and what is here?  
 And in the lighted palace near  
 Died the sound of royal cheer  
 And they cross'd themselves for fear  
 All the knights of Camelot.  
 But Lancelot mused a little space.  
 He said, "She has a lovely face.  
 God in his mercy lend her grace,  
 The Lady of Shalott.*

## Chapter 40

The lunar and solar calendars, the Jewish and Christian calendars, whatever calendars are used to determine the holidays that align this year, allow a five-day stretch of holiday over the Easter weekend. Many Westside realtors are taking this time off right in the middle of their busiest season, so Shauna takes the red-eye to New York, setting down into the city in the dusky morning light.

People pour out of LaGuardia. She doesn't want to share a cab. With no luggage to speak of, just a wheeled carry-on and a Trader Joe's brown shopping bag full of treats for Harry Eliza and a woman Shauna doesn't know, Harry's mother, Shauna considers the airport shuttle, when a rogue cab pulls up next to her, deposits a passenger and waves her in.

- Manhattan?
- Lower East Side, please. Tomskin Square.
- That ain't an address, lady.

Shauna digs into her purse as they merge onto the Brooklyn Queens Expressway. How ugly the city looks to Shauna at this early hour. It does so much better at night. The apartment number she has scrawled on a piece of paper in her hand, as if she doesn't know it by heart. They cross the bridge and move up into the East Village.

The cabby pulls up. Shauna notices there are three or four people standing outside the four-story building where her daughter lives. One of the small group is a cop. He is also looking up, and Shauna follows their eyes. She is looking up to where the sun should be but there is only grey light silhouetting something, a figure on the ledge, a head with strings like snakes. It is not string but long hair and it is not a snake but a girl on the ledge. The girl doesn't notice the crowd because she is looking up, leaning over the ledge and looking up.

- Eliza!

Shauna calls out. The police officer grabs her arm to hush her.

- Don't startle her.
- What is happening?

Maybe Shauna asks but her throat is dry as cotton and she is not sure anything comes out of her mouth that is wide as a cave.

- I think she might be freaked out or something, Mam. She's been up there, hanging over the edge like that, for several minutes. We don't want to startle her. She could fall, Mam.

She could fall. She could fly off that ledge. She looks as small as a sparrow. How is this happening, that Eliza leans over the edge like that and yet doesn't move? Wisps of hair catch what little breeze there is moving the air. Nothing else, no one else, moves.

- Liza Bear?

Shauna mumbles, and the police man is looking at her strangely, looking at her standing there next to him with her small suitcase, her bedraggled appearance from an overnight flight. A month with so little sleep. I must look ancient, as old as my own mother, Shauna thinks, but she doesn't say another word until the police officer asks,

- Is she yours?

Meaning she might be allowed to save her daughter. He will take her up to the roof if she is hers, and Shauna will grab her hand and pull her to safety.

- Yes, she's mine.

Shauna claims her.

- What do you suggest we do here? I've called for an emergency vehicle.
- She's my daughter. I'm her mother. Eliza!

Shauna calls out again, and the girl far above them startles, pulls back and turns, so now she is leaning over, bent at the waist toward the street below instead of looking up toward the sky. She looks as if she is suspended in air, like the sparrow they once considered the heir to their lives in their next lives, hanging on the air rather than supported by the bricks of the wall, the ledge that circles the building. But she is not a sparrow, nor is Shauna, standing there way beneath her.

- Dear child, don't jump. God . . . hold you . . . hold on.

A man in a turban standing next to her shakes his head and smiles warmly to her.

- Don't worry, mam. Such a sad story can never be told. Before it even began God would stop it.
- But I don't believe in God.
- No worry. God would stop it anyway.
- Mom? Is that you?

Eliza's words can hardly be heard, Shauna is so far below. But she can see her daughter shrugging, as if there is nothing at all the matter.

- Wait, Mom. I'll buzz you in.

Shauna thinks this is what Eliza has called down. Shauna cannot see the expression on her daughter's face, but her shoulders are loose. She is shrugging as if to ask: what is happening down there? Finally she is gone off the ledge, has stepped back out of sight. The three men that stand around her are embarrassed. They also shrug, and the old man whom she hadn't noticed except as a form pointing up, up to where her daughter hung suspended, now chuckles.

- Well, I wonder what the hell she was looking at way up there?

Over coffee in her kitchen Eliza explains that she finished the play. It is dreadful, really. The script is flawed. How was she allowed to play the part at all; she's still under age, Shauna enquires. I lied, Eliza explains. It doesn't matter. The run ended way sooner for anyone to have time to investigate if they cared. She tried to fix it and Theo tried to help some more, but how can one establish dramatic action with the lady who talks to no one, knows no one?

- No, you can't see it, Mother. It is closed. Yes, after only two weeks. I didn't send you the reviews because they were awful. It has to be a film, Mother. That's what I've been saying all along. I told my agent. There is at once too much and too little there for a stage. And that dragon I invented; what a fiasco. You remember the dragon, Mom? I think you read that version. Remind me, I know shit about stagecraft. It can work but it needs a real horizon. It needs a director. There is a director interested in the film rights. I'm staying on top of that, but it means I'd have to go back to L.A. That wouldn't be all bad, I suppose.

After another sip of coffee she assures Shauna that she wants to come home for a visit in any case. She is settling into New York, has friends here now. A girlfriend. The girlfriend is absolutely necessary even if they treat each other casually. She even has another job at a café which is fine. But she can take time off. Everyone there at the café is a model except her, and they are used to this business. They cover for each other. Even if she has to

go to Los Angeles like for a month shoot they say they'll cover for her. She can always come back. It's this apartment she's afraid to lose.

- You know what it's like, getting an apartment in the city, Mom. And isn't this a nice little apartment?
- It's quite nice.
- It's just a sublet anyway. But it is so hard to find a place.
- So I have heard.
- Susan said I can always stay with her and Harry in a pinch.
- Eliza, what were you looking at up on the roof, dear?
- The clouds. Have you ever noticed on overcast days, Mom? No matter how plain the sky, the longer you stare the more you see. I mean, in Los Angeles who ever looks at the clouds. I mean, what clouds. You've got those white puff balls or nothing at all. Here they are moody. Whoever knew there are so many shades of grey. I love it. You ever notice it here?
- No, Liza. Next time I'm out there I will look up.

Shauna realizes that it never even occurred to Eliza to jump, or even that she might fall. Her curiosity was everything. Willful death, even ordinary danger, hardly occurs to her.

- Mom, I do want to go home for a visit. It's great that you are here, but I want to go home. Can you stay through the weekend, maybe part of next week, until I can take a few extra days off? We can fly home together. I'd like to go back with you, but only for a few days. I'm going to push for the movie. It would be a wonderful movie, even if it does mean I have to go back to L.A. Wow, I hate it there but if I have to go, I will go.

- Los Angeles? You hate it so much? You always loved the beach, the city, the desert . . .
- That was then. This is now. I just want to go home for a visit.
- Oh, Liza Bear, that sounds perfect.

would bring into the world for better and for worse. She too is weary of shadows.

Eliza's friends are on their exam break. They should all be studying but they are here visiting with Eliza. Shauna goes up to her room to relax now that her daughter is back home. Home in a way of speaking. It is not Eliza's home in the old way. Now it is her first home but not her only home. It is so good to see Eliza eating, putting on some of the weight she lost. It is over. She played the part, and now she doesn't have to play it anymore. Not this part. There will be others.

The sliver of light beneath the bedroom door is broken with Eliza's foot shadows. Shauna does not answer the knock on her bedroom door and Eliza's shadow goes away. It is not the shadow that Shauna longs for, but the voices and she does hear voices. Eliza and the others are laughing with her over tea and the walnut cakes that Shauna had set out for her daughter and her friends in the kitchen.

Shauna doesn't think of her daughter or of the cake anymore. She thinks of the door closed, Eliza on that side with her friends. Their noise fills Shauna with warmth but the door stays shut. The grocer is on that side, her clients, Emma and her other women friends on that side, her manager, Fred, and the doctor on that side. On her side, cold thinking goes on or no thought, only blank staring. Alone she doesn't really seem to exist, merely weather patterns of air, drafts, and breath. She looks at the vase of tulips that drips red petals and leaves rings on the wood dresser top. She feels for the wet spot, the drying water from which amoebas and her own oldest life emerges.

## Chapter 41

*For ere she reach'd upon the tide  
The first house by the waterside,  
Singing in her song she died,  
The Lady of Shalott.*

Why did the lady have to die? Did Tennyson lack the imagination to keep her suspended in life, or was it some weakness within her, a heart condition that had gone too long untreated? Or something else altogether, not a weakness from within but, as Tennyson wrote, the curse he put on her?

Tennyson's poem is not a story of suicide. Shauna finally resolves that in her mind. The lady simply wanted larger quarters. Or perhaps she doesn't even want to move, but just to step out, to take a turn around town, slip into a pub for a pint. Perhaps she simply wanted to look directly into the face of a man, touch his hand in a casual handshake. God help her, she's woven so many scenes, she should have been allowed to step into a happy one.

Nor is Shauna's mother's story a story of suicide. It was an idle threat. Shauna thinks she finally understands. They used to say her mother just cracked, but really, it was only the mirror.

Shauna has carried the lady's death so long she is tired. She carried it as if it were her own unborn baby, a foetus that was part of her, that she