

PATRICIA RYAN

WAR
INA
*Beautiful
Country*

WAR IN A BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY

A Novel By
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To Vera and Bill;
In their own way: courageous, graceful, and true

Because death is unknown, life becomes the puzzle.

PROLOGUE

It was easy enough to pull off and difficult enough to be exciting.

Surfing the data felt like cruising the bars. All those women! In his mind: young, single, sexy , with cars, and credit cards, and gynecological medical records and special interest magazines----Romance. Brides. Good Housekeeping; weren't they the cozy ones! And addresses and birthdays.

He played cursor roulette, looking for a name with the required first letter for his

SCARED (**S.C.A.R.E.D**) project. Looking for a name he could control; a name he had power over; a name that would give him a new rush, the thrill again of becoming the most important man in this woman's life; the name of someone who would let him overtake her days and nights, so that she thought of nothing but him, did nothing but worry about him, changed her life because of him; the name of someone he could lie in his prison bunk and happily know: "She's locking her door because of me. She's looking behind her in hallways because of me. She's afraid to go to the store, the movies, open her mail because of me."

It wasn't quite like the women he used to hit but it was a close second.

In the end, his choice for the lucky lady with whom he would correspond was a random guess, simply like pulling a name from a hat.

In any case, by now he had found “**R.**” **R**egina. And when he got tired of her, he would still have two more to go. **E.** **D.** Besides, after enough time had passed, he felt the women probably started to ignore the threats since they never materialized. Or they had nervous breakdowns and no one forwarded the letters to the loony bin. But for now, it was **R**egina.

CHAPTER ONE

i.

The note said:

*Dear Regina,
Soon I will blow you up.
Love, God.*

CHAPTER TWO

"Well, Ms." Detective Walker said, folding the note back into its small envelope and putting it on his crowded desk, "obviously this is someone with 'Delusions of Grandeur'."

He smiled at his own eloquent language.

"But," he continued, "more likely it's just some guy--assuming it is a guy--with a strange sense of humor. Or maybe that trucking company," he chuckled.

"What?" Regina asked.

"You haven't you seen the GOD trucking company? 1-800-CALL GOD?"

"No."

"Guaranteed Overnight Delivery." Detective Walker felt the need to smile again.

"Well, in any case," he continued, "I wouldn't be afraid if I were you, because chances are this so-called threat is merely a random...."

"Chances?!... Random?! But..it has my name and address on it!"

"So does your junk mail."

Regina was not entirely satisfied with Det. Walker. The way he let the small envelope with its ominous message just float around in the morass on his desk, working its way under all the other papers, losing its place of importance and urgency. Finally she said, "Listen, I'm just an ordinary citizen leading an ordinary life. Why would.. he...or anyone....do such a thing?!..."

Detective Walker stretched his jacketless arms back over his head, tilting his chair away from her.

"Because he can..." was his reply.

ii

As Regina walked through the sad, day-old snow that had turned to gray slush, back to the nearby parking lot where her silvery Saab—a guilt gift of the divorce-- was tightly squeezed an inch away from the car next to it, she asked herself why some indifferent detective would behave as if a threat to blow her up was merely frivolous.

Yet Regina, too, wanted to resist being afraid. She resented the emotional strain that fear would bring now.

Lately, a satisfying melancholy had settled over her upturned life and calmed her down: a letting go, an acceptance of her newly realized failures. She did not want to exchange this empty peace for fear, which would require her active participation again, just as she no longer wanted her heart to be excited by love.

It was already enough that understanding something new about herself everyday felt like rocks being thrown at her head.

CHAPTER THREE

i.

Drew would be the first person, after Detective Walker, that Regina would tell about the note.

When Regina saw Drew a year ago at the Gallery, she looked at him with a sudden interest that made him feel he had been given a surprise present.

He didn't know her look was for someone else. For some other young man he reminded her of. Realizing her mistake, Regina quickly turned her attention back to the exhibit, but it was too late.

Drew slowly moved next to her, pretending to study the three pieces of red, white, and blue string that lie on the floor parallel to each other, titled Un-tied States.

"Would you say this is good art?" he asked, unaware that the road to Regina had been smoothly paved for him by her superficial, but pleasant, memories of someone else.

"There is no good or bad art. Only good or bad galleries," she replied cynically.

"Is this one good or bad?"

"If it ever shows my work, then it's good ."

"How do you feel about good restaurants?" Drew asked.

"Great," she responded.

ii

Since pulling out of the parking lot near the police station, Regina had not made much progress driving uptown towards Drew's small apartment. Not that she was surprised by this.

People kept asking her: "Why would you possibly want to drive in New York City?"

"It has a life all its own," she tried to explain.

Driving in New York City was Regina's private, stubborn, idiosyncrasy. No doubt others would think her crazy if she told them she loved driving best during the worst traffic, when maneuvering a two-ton killing machine required the agility of the amusement park game of Go Carts, when her whole mind and body were a perfectly mixed combination of knowledge, skill, and courage; when motion and sound from every direction played on her brain like strobe lights, a great flashing, screaming, confusing, and rhythmic cha cha cha of chaos, seeing first this, then that, with it all changing each time other stimuli hit her eyeballs, as cars, trucks, and vans would weave, stop, slam on brakes, pull out, and cut across her without warning; with pedestrians on cell phones, walking in front of her as if they were strolling onto their patios; bicyclists blindsiding her; skateboarders rolling out from between parked cars; and even pigeons which strut until nearly under her oncoming wheels, giving off a full dose of New York attitude—"Hey, I'm walking here!"—and only managing to get out of harm's way by an inch.... that inch that saves every New Yorker, that inch which is all you need between cars,

tables in restaurants, and the thirteen million people a day packed into a mere 23 square miles.

There was something exhilarating about how hard it was to drive in New York. It was like living here.

iii

Regina was often aware that having New York City as your hometown, the place you would return to if you needed to get back to your roots and be comforted, was strange. In all the old movies, wasn't a hometown where you got off a Greyhound bus on a dirt road, carrying a duffle bag, and everyone ran out of the house to hug you?

Instead, whenever Regina returned from out of town, she knew she was getting close to home when she began to see big foam dice dancing from the rear-view mirrors of other cars passing her on the road to the city. She realized she couldn't get much primal comfort here.

She often wondered what it would be like to have that special thrill of seeing New York for the first time. Being born in New York City was like coming into the world already having had your first orgasm. There would never be the shuddering recognition that your life had been rearranged for all time.

Even though-- like most New Yorkers--Regina often hated living here, it always took her by surprise how violently she loved this city—how New York was not only her city, but her country, her race, her sex, her religion.

Still, many times she felt like leaving. Moving to some orderly, clean, rational, sensible, well-organized, friendly place where all the construction was finished. Where the number of people in the average parade was not larger than some countries.

But she was afraid that when the relief and pleasure wore off, the very ease of it would bore her and she would secretly scream, "What have I done??!"

She would yearn to see straggly plants breaking through concrete, or growing on rooftops in what seemed nothing but air and dust, the hearty fearless birds, and the sudden glimpses of fiercely blue sky, so prized for its impossibility.

Yes, she often thought of leaving.

But every time she saw photos of the city, even while she was in it, she would miss it, get homesick for it. As if she were already gone, she would desperately want to get back.

Although she was still here.

CHAPTER FOUR

Regina kissed Drew hello.

"I got a note in the mail today. It said:

'Dear Regina, Soon I will blow you up. Love, God.'"

Drew laughed. "No, you didn't," he said. "It's a joke, right? 'Love, God', that's funny. Actually, it's corny."

Regina laughed too. "Yes, it is corny. And it may be a joke. We don't know."

"We....?"

"I went to the police."

"You're serious! You really did get...."

"Yes."

How did you get it?" Drew asked.

"In my letterbox. Downstairs."

"Was it to you?"

"Yes. It had my name and address on the envelope."

"Did it have a postmark?"

"That's the strange thing. It was from Texas."

"Well, see...maybe it's just a junk mail promotion for something."

"Like what?"

"Like...say, a movie...or a life insurance policy....I don't know! What do you think it is?"

"I don't know what to think. So far, something like this is out of my realm of experience."

Drew was making dinner for them. He turned back to the stove and didn't say anything more. Regina never helped him cook. The kitchen was so small that working together would have brought them both to a standstill. Besides, she needed something like an Indian guide to get through his refrigerator, even after at least half of its contents fell to the floor whenever the door opened.

Instead, she sat on the couch, studied him, and thought appreciatively of how he was so full of sweet virility.

In Drew's apartment everything was in the same room, which meant they were always together. It was a strange, narrow, little place on the ground floor, carved out of an old brownstone. Once each room had been part of a whole house, but now was a tiny, separate, studio apartment. It was an interesting place to have a crowded party. With everyone in the same small, long room, people lined up, like in a railroad car. To get another drink or go to the bathroom, you would have to push from the middle, as the crowd automatically swayed slightly to allow a crooked path. You could spend the whole night walking sideways and meeting new people.

At one party--after the close of a small play in which Drew had a rather good part --the cast and crew converged at Drew's apartment. By midnight everyone was in an altered state from emotion, beer, and no food. The play's lighting designer believed no one liked him because he was Japanese and threatened to commit suicide. He opened the window with a dramatic flourish.

"I am going to jump!" he cried loudly. No one paid any attention.

"Hi," a passing dog walker said as he put both legs over the outside ledge.

The startled designer hopped down to the sidewalk from the street level window and returned to the party through the front door. Everyone was grateful for the fresh air.

Regina didn't know why she remembered this as she watched Drew test a spaghetti strand by folding it over a potholder he held in his other hand.

Then Drew said, "I think Texas is too far away from here. Even for God."

"Not if God showed up in your mailbox, it wouldn't be."

Regina was not altogether surprised that Drew too, was not taking her situation seriously.

Unlike Detective Walker, a professional, she was sure Drew's reason came from the more common reaction of his youthful age group. In her mind, they all seemed generally indifferent,

with the exception of what was happening to themselves at the moment. Then they gave the same out-of-proportion importance to every one of their own crises, big and small, which, ironically, led to a misunderstanding of their own good, and sometimes great, lives.

Mostly Regina appreciated the charm of Drew's being fifteen years younger, yet some part of her always felt superior. In small ways she could become just plain annoyed, and sometimes bored. Together they joked that the real differences between their ages was that Drew

came from the stand-in-one-spot-and-just-wave-your-arms generation of hard rock, while Regina believed the only real concerts had violins and a cello.

"Why are you still with this child?" her Aunt Doris had once admonished. "You have to be careful. The young treat you the way they are feeling about themselves. They don't know enough yet to treat you the way you've earned being treated. They're still amateur people, you know."

"Doris!" Regina had exclaimed.

But Doris was right.

Regina remembered herself when she was young; young enough not to realize she was liked because she was young; young enough to think that if others wanted to be of value, they had to be young too.

She recalled how she had behaved at one of her first jobs, as a too-young-almost-manager of a small art department in a large corporation. Once, on a day when she was particularly full of her own view of the world, a supplier who sold paper to her predecessor dropped in to see her. She was furious: imagine his not making an appointment! Didn't he know who she was!

After keeping him waiting longer than she had to, she went out to the reception area rather than invite him into her office.

He was old! It wouldn't do.

The man had thin white hair and looked a bit frail, actually. He was lugging around a heavy, square, black case with samples of every kind of paper imaginable. Why did she have to see this? She knew what paper looked like.

Annoyance and disdain covered her as though it were her outfit for the day. The man reeled from her rude introduction.

After a few cursory minutes looking at paper--during which time the old man nervously tried to establish contact with her by describing the good partnership he always had with the company--Regina thanked him coldly and said she was busy. He gathered up his samples and left.

Regina caught the accusatory look he shot her, but it was only decades later, that passing time allowed her to know what that look told her about who she was *then*. And now, knowing this taunted her, embarrassed her. Lately, under hard-earned wisdom's new spell, she could see things once lost in the past.... not just in this case, but in many others as well: the meaning of glances and looks locked in her head all these years, lying in wait to become clear.

Yes, she too had once been an amateur person .

It made her wonder to herself: if I was such a jerk then and didn't know it, how do I know I'm not one now?

"There is no great way to be a human being," Doris often told her.

ii

She was startled back from her reverie as Drew continued to press his point.

"You hate it when I'm right," Drew accused her.

"That's not true; I like it when you're right."

She did like it when he was right. Regina secretly felt Drew was not as sharply aware as she would prefer him to be. She saw him as the kind of person who couldn't seem to talk and push an elevator button at the same time.

But Drew had his appeal. He was sometimes willing to lead her life. But more importantly, he did not require her to lead his.

Regina knew it was easy to fall in love with someone else's life. She herself did it with men she wished she could have known who were no longer alive, if they had sensuously left behind the valuable core of themselves in a book, a painting, or an idea. Regina recognized she was a bit of an achievement groupie, a talent eater. As a would-be artist herself, plagued by a lack of confidence, sometimes she wanted to suck all the talent out of a man, dead or alive, for herself. She could turn a man's resume into an aphrodisiac.

She saw some of this same tendency in Drew, struggling to be an actor and insecure in his own work, when, the first time he had come to her loft and saw the large number of paintings, both finished and in process, a place full of everything needed to paint and used seemingly without hesitation, a testament to commitment and

accomplishment. He could not know at this time Regina's inner grief at not getting out of herself what was inside, so he mistakenly said:

"It must be good to be you,"
Still.

For her, Drew provided only a temporary and unusual pleasure, like being at a lovely resort where she knew she could not remain. She saw no sense in turning the metaphorical great weekend into a lifetime of misery.

Sometimes after a long day with Drew, Regina would think: I miss brilliant people. I don't mean sitting around discussing quantum physics. I mean being with people whose minds can give ordinary life an extra shine.

So when Drew was right, she felt encouraged. And if he were right in this case about the note being merely a gimmick, it would also be a great relief.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was one more delusion ordinary people lived under, that once in jail a person could no longer hurt you.

In one way or another.

It was not unheard of that in some prisons the guards were so lax they lost cell block keys; that in some prisons drugs were on the radar screen, but smuggling out sperm was not; that in some prisons there was so much overtime the guards couldn't keep their eyes open; in some prisons the personnel were using their PCs to watch porn instead of inmates; and in all prisons the record-high population made it nearly impossible, even with the very best of intentions, to keep up with everything going on inside.

No wonder he could get the letters out.

CHAPTER SIX

i.

*Dear Regina,
GOD SAYS BOOM AND HE DON'T MEAN THUNDER.
Love.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Seated on a small bench beneath one of the few windows on the dark painting side of Regina's loft, Detective Angela Vega was putting on lipstick without a mirror and she got it on her two front teeth. Her black jacket was full of cat hairs and a few stains. Regina noticed that throughout the morning Det. Vega left a used, rolled up tissue wherever she had been, just as Hansel and Gretel left crumbs to find the way home.

After swiveling the lipstick back into its case like a retractable penis, Det. Angela Vega laughed and then boomed : "Ever notice that it's the guy who can't get it up who's the first one to criticize your clothes, your hair, your cooking,...your weight...?"

Angela Vega's laugh resembled cracking ice, and it occasionally interrupted her strong speech, which did not start slowly and then build in volume, but instead began with the immediate loud gush of a faucet turned on at full force--SWOOSH! all at once--so that the listener had a desire to back up from fear of being splashed by words.

Without pause, Det. Vega immediately skipped to: " I know how much these notes must frighten you. I understand they are very scary, but a little stupid--no, they're silly--I can hear the guy chuckling now--'God Says Boom And He Don't Mean Thunder'--boy, that's a good one. A good one because it's so bad. I think your saving grace in all this is that these notes are so--as you said--'corny.' I've never

heard of a serious bomber that was corny. They're too nuts to be corny."

Det. Vega--"call me Angela" --had arrived at the loft at 10 a.m., three days after

Regina called Det. Walker about the new note, and two months after the first one.

"Well, at least this guy's not in a hurry," Det. Walker had said. "I'll send someone when I can."

Regina was surprised to see Angela. She automatically expected a man.

Without even saying hello, Detective Vega pronounced: "You expected a man, right? You'd think with all the progress we've made, and all us lady cops on the force and on t.v., it wouldn't still happen. It happens all the time. And then after people catch themselves, they recover by asking me about my job and how come I'm a cop. I tell them I used to fantasize about being a hat check girl, like in the old 1940's movies, at some sleazy nightclub where all the sweet-talking, big-tipping gangsters went. Then I realized the false power I would get from being treated kindly by cruel men could not be a lifestyle. So I thought being a cop was a good compromise. That and a conversation I once had with this guy: I asked him if he ever thought he would like to be a woman....you know, the way women sometimes wish they could see what it feels like to be a man, and he became aghast and said: 'I would no more want to be a woman than I would want to be a dog.'

'I beg your PARDON!....,' I said.

He said, 'Why would I want to be someone at least half the world is stronger than?'

I took his point." She patted her gun, "I decided to be 'stronger than'.....

But it's ok if at first you were surprised. We all still have our little prejudices about the gender thing.

Just between you and me,even though I don't want to, I myself can't help having a small secret joy when I hear a woman has committed murder. But, of course, I never feel that way when a man does.

It's true women are allowed to be astronauts, but they are hard to find as game show hosts.

Listen, when men want to be buffoons, they still dress up

like women and for insults they call each other 'ladies.' I

believe true equality will arrive only when you tell a man

he throws like a girl and he says 'thank you'."

Angela rolled up another used tissue and left it on the windowsill as she got up to look more closely at the painting Regina had been working on.

"This is interesting," Angela said. "I'm not sure what it is, but at least it doesn't have people in it. Having people in pictures, especially of nature, can ruin a beautiful scene for me. I can't help thinking 'I wish these people were not spoiling those wonderful views.' So how's the painting life? It can't be too good."

Regina did not want to tell Angela about the painting life. To Regina it was a serious, almost religious subject, fraught with spiritual, social, and economic problems. Unless you were a painter yourself, such a conversation could make people's eyes glaze over.

Regina believed Angela was just using this mock interest to find out other things about her...things which Regina would gladly tell her directly. But most of all, she was afraid that Det. Vega would not let her finish a sentence about painting or anything else. She hadn't all morning.

"What are the police doing about these notes, about my life being in danger!"

"Your life's not in danger, sweetie. Besides, what can the police do? Where was the first one from? Texas? This one is from Vermont. We can inquire from both states if they have any bombers on the loose, and that's about it....especially since there has been no evidence of harm."

"Are you waiting until I get blown up?"

Angela laughed, cracking ice again.

"Don't worry. These aren't really bomb threats. What they are...is..well, these days we all can do anything we want, so what can someone do if he feels the need to break a taboo that isn't there anymore? It used to be Sex. Gone. It used to be anything about Communists. Gone. There is nothing left to shock, hell, not even anything left to use as blackmail...not unwed mothers, abortion, adoption, illegitimacy, infidelity in high places, homosexuality, transvestites, corruption, old enemies, new friends.....the

only truly scary things left are child pornography, incest, and identity theft.

I'm not saying letter bombings don't happen. They happen all the time. But not from two corny notes, two months apart, from two different states."

Regina was surprised to hear Angela sigh.

"How strange we are...fleeing from all the harm that faced ancient man in the natural world, and then rushing to form societies so we could huddle with each other, the most treacherous element on earth. And to think scientists are looking for our own kind on other planets. As if nature would make the same mistake twice."

ii

The following week a random bomb, delivered by mail, killed a woman in Brooklyn, one more victim in a series of Brooklyn letter-bombs over the past couple of years. In addition, pipe bombs were blowing up in mailboxes all over the mid-west.

Det. Angela Vega showed up at Regina's loft without being called, and this time she made a mostly futile effort to sometimes let Regina talk.

"I can't think of anyone who would want to kill me. I'm not mad at anyone, or anyone at me," Regina said.

"As far as you know.... let's start with our best bet: your nearest and dearest. What about your husband?"

The mental picture of Marius could still flood Regina with warmth.

"I'm divorced," Regina said.

"Ah, ha! We can explore that."

"No, that's impossible!"

"So you say. OK, we'll get back to that later. Next chief culprit, a boyfriend?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of?....He married?"

"No. No."

"That's good. Men marry so they can get a lot of sex without having to be nice to anyone...."

"...I don't think that's exactly....." Regina tried to respond.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Angela continued, “I love sex. Especially first times. It’s like traveling.”

“That’s nice,” Regina said vaguely , not in the mood to discuss anything other than how she could be protected from the threats against her life.

Pushing her point , Det. Vega punched in: “ A man who once wanted to give you everything, take care of you with his life, will let you fall off a cliff, or worse, when he is no longer sleeping with you....which brings us back to your ex-husband....”

“I already told you my husband has nothing to do with this.”

From experience, Angela knew most women were in denial about how much a loved one loved them. Or not.

“You think it can’t be *your* husband? The one who divorced you.....”

Regina’s back stiffened: “It was mutual, detective...”

“Ok,” Angela eased up.

But then continued, “All I’m saying is that even a happy marriage can require a lifetime of misery. Look, it’s not just my opinion. The government’s definition of durable goods is only three years. And in a divorce ...as you must well know... you get the privilege of watching the one person you would go to for his generous feelings towards you, turn sour on you. Oh, he may continue to love you; he just won’t like you anymore. Listen, I understand it is easy to get tired of someone you love. Hell, I get tired of myself.... Besides who am I to talk? I left my first husband when I got bored. Well, I was young....”

When Angela talked, her eyes seemed to roll in her head like a blind person's, seeking to read what was on her mind from some imaginary screen inside her forehead, channel-surfing her own brain. She was often strangely remote from her listener, as if the conversation were only with herself and she would have it, whether you were there or not.

"Face it, marriage never solves the existential problems.... Besides, I know too much about men who are married to ever want another one of my own. What for? For security? No way! If we don't earn our own money, we're always in danger of having to ask our husbands to buy our pantyhose. For sex? Ha! Men don't make love as well as they think they do. I wish men knew more about each other: that some have enough lint in their bellybuttons to create a pet; that others have sperm like tapioca pudding."

"Oh, *please*, detective....."

"No," Mrs. Parker, I realize that you, like everyone, had great hopes, but by now you must know that we can't rule out your ex-husband. You may have to face the fact that the price for marriage is often too high...well, not so much that the price is too high: it's that the rewards are too small."

Regina thought about her own favorite metaphor about the high price for small rewards...the time Marius decided that he wanted to have his own apple orchard on a small plot of land his family owned. After cultivating the soil, planting the trees, and waiting over a year, he was triumphant with

the few puny apples that were produced. When all was calculated, he realized each apple cost him \$400. Regina often thought her marriage had been a \$400 apple. But she didn't tell Angela any of this.

"So," Angela said, finally getting back to business and breaking into another of Regina's reveries, a state which was becoming all too natural for her lately, "what's this 'sort of ' business with the boyfriend?"

Regina said: " I like him. I just don't love him."

"Could this 'sort of' boyfriend be mad that you don't love him?"

"Drew?! He's thrilled that I don't love him."

iii

Detective Angela Vega had opinions about everything and loved every one of them.

Her daily conversations could jack-hammer listeners into near unconsciousness and disturb them with their bitterness.

But she would always fall back on the idea that the cantankerous aspects of her unwelcome speeches were an occupational hazard.

After years of watching what people do, she was always surprised that scientists pushed the idea that humans were intelligent and adaptable. She thought: it's not entirely true; we are poorly equipped for life. We really don't know how to be in it well. She had come to believe that life as we know it was not the natural element of humans; that while we believed we were designed to be conquerors of the earth and soon the cosmos, the truth was, our bodies could not withstand even the easy laws of nature and our brains struggled with the simplest logic.

Some questions seemed just too big for humans to handle. But the one question we seemed to figure out was how to bring about our own demise and of all that around us.

No wonder we don't like it here, if you can go by all the unhappy people.

Ancient liturgies call life, "a valley of tears."

Angela preferred to think of it as war in a beautiful country.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Regina struggled to paint light as only a squinting eye could see it.

She wanted to paint refracted light, the multiple repetitions of color, all the snakes of streaked light that fast speed photography at night could do. But more, she wanted to capture light even a camera could not. Instead, she wanted only what the half closed eye could *really* see: light in streams, liquid light falling like rain in a puddle, fractured, dispersed, spread out. Light breaking down instead of building up.

But Regina couldn't quite do it.

She found that once the paint was down, it was no longer light itself, but only color.

To make matters worse, she was compelled to paint just one theme--a theme not much called for-- of the light made by an orchestra on stage in a concert hall.

From above.

All fuzzy dabs and lines of the black and white evening clothes, of the musical scores, the various spots of flesh tones in faces, the rainbow of hair colors seen from afar, the light always bright from the top, the orchestra and instruments held in a Cup of Frissoned Light.

Light as a gleaming line reflected from the brass, reflected the way the sun on the French hunting horns used to scare the horses. Reflected from eyeglasses, bald heads, violins, walls, floors.

Regina didn't want to paint an orchestra. No. Just the light from one that was captured in a jar and then shaken out

like salt to produce only what the unfocused eye could see.

But she couldn't quite get it.

And she made things even harder for herself because if she ever did get it right, she wanted the scope and depth and truth and *newness* of the work to make people say "oh, my god!"

She wanted them to stagger under the weight of her talent as she so often did when she suddenly came upon the real thing in others.

She wanted them to get a giddy, frightened sensation, as if they were being abducted into some alien space craft, so startling and powerful would be the experience of seeing her work. She wanted someone to write her a letter saying, "I thought your painting would kill me."

But she couldn't quite get it.

So she was humbled personally, and artistically she was doomed

ii.

Instead of breaking new ground, doing visionary work, work that had never been done before, art for the new millennium, there was too much of yesterday in Regina's work.

She couldn't help it. It was all she knew.

But she was willing to learn. She tried several of the new forms, with computers and multi-media, but it all felt artificial. She regretted that her soul couldn't grasp the magic of art through technology, and she knew it could be her soul's fault.

She tried the random art of cyberspace, of fractals and endless repeating patterns without human interference. Certainly there was a beauty in randomness, just look at the Cosmos. But, she thought, even in science the new gets old fast.

In any case, even if randomness can make it beautiful, only intent can make it art. Wasn't it art's job to organize the chaos of life, of the universe? In Regina's view, what made the capricious results of technology irrelevant, was that they represented no intentional shaping of what comes out of human unconsciousness—no wrestling to the ground the over-muscled boa constrictor of creativity.

These explorations made her a double failure. She failed to get results in either the old forms or the new. In the ultimate paradox, because she could not paint the future in the present, she would not go down in what would become the past: history.

"But you do your best," Marius would tell her when she would moan and complain.

"That's what everybody says," Regina answered, "but nobody ever does their best in anything."

"Well, everything can't be improved constantly," Marius

pointed out, " It already takes an enormous amount of

effort and ability just to do something.....fairly good."

Regina hated this.

"Fairly good? You mean mediocre. Just good enough to keep me in mediocre purgatory... bound to the work simply because it is not really bad."

"You know," Marius said, " You have a good flair for design; maybe you could go into the mail order art business. I've always loved the mail order business...you can work from home....no overhead.....no inventory.....everything is profit....."

Regina shot him one of her "...don't..." looks.

"Anyway," he continued, " everyone in the world is scrambling to get their own story told with no one to listen . So what can you expect? Maybe there is already too much art"

Yes, Regina thought, everybody's a goddamn painter. You can't even get to the wine bar at any gallery show full of real painters, more painters, some painters, and wannabe painters.

She used to crave being in a room filled with other artists. Then suddenly she couldn't stand it.

So many different visions, the high-pitched crescendo of other people's talent shattered her and made her dizzy and nearly ill. "Beauty is the beginning of a terror we can barely endure," the poet said. She became overwhelmed and frightened by the good painters, afraid they would leave no room for her. Yet the bad painters embarrassed her: "Am I like that!?"

Marius said, "Don't worry about it. If you are not this century's greatest painter, nothing bad will happen."

"But don't you see?!" she said to Marius, "I want more than just not having anything bad happen. I want something good, *very* good, to happen."

iii.

What was it that always made Regina so miserable when she painted? Was it the dark loft, a seemingly strange choice for a lover of light? Regina picked this loft because she knew that natural light was the enemy of her artistic goals. It was a huge square room on a low floor of an old fabric warehouse. In the front were tall, narrow windows where light occasionally knifed down through the surrounding buildings. Regina set this area up as her sparse, undecorated living space.

At the rear were two small windows, useless since they were just inches away from the next building. They created a shaft of perpetual sour twilight rather than a source of light and air.

It was perfect for painting.

Regina put black photographers' shades over the useless windows to create the darkest spot possible in an already dark loft, so dark that with flood lamps she could re-create the artificial light resembling a concert hall. When painting, her loft became a blind, dead, and dreary cave.

Was this why melancholy was fast becoming her permanent state of mind?

She thought: I feel as if the sun went in and will never come out.

Instead of her old joy, she had become one of those generally miserable people. Perhaps it was not the dark loft, but the divorce that was changing her so radically? It

seemed she was flailing about with nothing to grab onto and couldn't figure out how to hold it all together. Or with whom.

She was beginning to understand that for some people, some things never happen: the gift of a loyal and loving mate; the energetic courage for significant work; being understood, or at least, not misunderstood.

She never expected perfection, but also never imagined that one could live with these things so wildly inadequate in one's life.

Maybe this bomb thing was good. What was there to live for, really.

When she got like this, she even annoyed herself. Maybe I ought to go out for a walk, she told herself, but didn't go. At least she had stopped thinking of suicide. Although why not? After all in Japan, suicide was socially accepted as an apology for failure.

"I think people commit suicide," her twin Nina once told her, "because they feel 'This will go on forever.' Listen, when you realize death will get you sooner or later you can just relax about it."

Regina knew Nina was right, killing yourself for failed goals was merely petulance.

As for the bomb threats: well, if she could manage to live with the fear of being one of the art world's smallest potatoes, she could probably live with any other.

Or almost...."any other".

Another, greater. fear—the granddaddy of all fears for Regina--- was just suppose, in spite of Marius' opinion, or more accurately her own, that instead of being ordinary, her work was in fact extraordinary. The best! And nobody would ever know it.

CHAPTER NINE

It didn't matter that regulations said:

"Outgoing correspondence containing threats or extortion may result in prosecution. When such material is discovered, the inmate will be subject to disciplinary action."

He didn't care.

After all, how much more disciplinary action could there be than lifetime in a cell.

CHAPTER TEN

i.

When she saw the small package stuffed into the back of the mailbox, behind the unwanted catalogues for fake flowers and outrageously priced dish towels, her mind automatically registered that it was her new checkbooks.

But something seemed ominously different.

True, the label was addressed correctly to her, although it was handwritten and the small carelessly wrapped box had several real stamps.

Warning signs vaguely remembered from news reports?

She tried to think whether or not she had ever received her checks with real stamps and if they had a return address, which this did not. She realized she never really paid attention to what the package her checks came in looked like. Now she couldn't tell what this was. She was either succumbing to foolish suspicion, jumping at every change, or she just had a worse memory than she realized.

Where was this postmarked? Idaho. Idaho! All her banking information, credit cards, checks, came from different places. Half the time she didn't know what they were and almost threw them away as junk mail. So the checkbooks *could* be from Idaho. Before she opened it, she could call the bank and see if they had sent her new checks--although she wasn't sure she had ordered any, but she might have-- and from where.

No. Maybe the package was too dangerous to wait. That was silly, of course it wasn't. After all, it had come safely through the mail. And if she called the bank, she would have to go through all those pre-recorded numbers and instructions and then hold on forever to talk to someone while the phone played bad music, or worse, the news. And would some clerk on the phone in a cubicle in god knows what state or foreign country even know if they were hers and came from Idaho?

She didn't think so.

She wouldn't call anyone. Instead, she would drive directly to the police station again and hand over the unopened package to the perpetually unconcerned Det. Walker.

ii

Det. Walker took the package from Regina and motioned for her to sit in the same hard wooden chair next to his desk that she first sat in so many months ago.

"You haven't hung up on any telemarketers lately, have you?" he asked.

"Probably. Why?"

"Some day they will have one too many phones slammed in their ear. 'Revenge of the Telemarketers'," he laughed, "And They Know Where You Live....."

Once such an idea would have been absurd to Regina, but now she just stared at Det. Walker, dumbfounded.

"No, no, I'm kidding," he said. "In any case, this isn't a bomb. It's probably just your checkbooks."

Regina tried to remember if she had told him she thought they were checkbooks or if they were so obviously checkbooks that everybody knew it, and she was grossly overreacting.

"I'm beginning to think I'm overreacting," she said apologetically. "I thought I was getting a grip on this, but I guess I'm wrong."

"Well, let's see. Just to be sure, I'm going to take this upstairs and let the experts embarrass you instead of me." Embarrass her!?! As if all the evidence of this kind of thing would embarrass anyone.

"Embarrass me!! Look, if I'm such a silly pest, why don't you just give me the package and I'll blow myself up in the

privacy of my own home!!" Regina reached out her hand for the small box.

"Now, now, don't be so touchy. I myself don't feel the need to examine this, because" he rattled the box and continued in a spooky voice, ".....oh, look, oooooow....it is not dangerous. But I'm obliged to check it out because even Congress is trained not to open packages and certain pieces of mail by themselves."

"I don't understand you." Regina said.

"Don't understand what?" Det. Walker replied.

"I don't understand, " Regina continued, " how you can call me 'touchy', and patronize me, when in the same breath you also tell me we are in fact all blowing each other up at the highest levels. I do not understand why you are not taking these bomb threats seriously!"

"I take bomb threats seriously. I don't take these pathetic attempts at bomb threats seriously."

"But why not!!!"

"Because bomb threats are the current harassment of choice, the latest game of chicken. Maybe it's just your neighbor's kid exercising some kid weirdness. Kids do a lot of this stuff. They can buy the ingredients in any grocery store or hobby shop. But they're not a big danger because they usually blow themselves up first. Do you have a neighbor's kid?"

She remembered the magazine article: "..... *it has come to this: kids can't drive to school for fear that bombs might be hidden inside their cars. Soda cans and bottles—unless they're clear plastic—are out. Ditto backpacks, unless*

they're mesh. There has been no actual violence.....but the school got 19 bomb threats last year and has gotten 10 so far this year....."

"No."

Walker was getting weary. He wanted to drop the box off upstairs and get on with the rest of his work. "Look, the sooner I get this checked out, the sooner you can relax and go home. And then maybe I can too. Tell you what....why don't you go into the waiting room and I'll ask one of the bomb guys to come down and try to explain it all to you....you'll feel better...." He took the package and headed upstairs before Regina could say anything else

The very existence of "the bomb guys" did not make her feel better. Besides she was not sure she needed anyone to explain anything to her. She knew what was going on. How bombs were just part of the ordinary, daily culture of American life. What had that television reporter said about his newscast no longer reporting most bomb threats?

"Our news policy is not to report threats alone, unless there is strong evidence that there is a real bomb. These days the bar has to be very high."

Isn't that what Det. Walker had been telling her all along? Isn't that why he had stopped sending anyone to investigate?

Still.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

i.

Even without these threats to her safety, as a New Yorker she was already in the thick of it. Home to the nation's oldest bomb squad, New York was always a hot bed of bombs. When you got right down to it, threats that were personal to her were sort of irrelevant.

Who knew when someone would decide to bring a bomb into a crowd, in boxes of flowers, in soup cans, in backpacks, in suitcases, in trash bins, in mailboxes? In cars? Anyone could be blown up anytime without any notes at all.

Regina didn't know why she hadn't thought of this before, why she became afraid just now, only as she herself became the target--if in fact she was a target--when she could logically have been afraid all along.

Her city was under perpetual siege.

Like most New Yorkers Regina had heard from her parents the story of the "Mad Bomber." For nearly 20 years he terrorized the city with thirty-three bombs, killing people in innocent public places, such as movie houses. The bombings stopped temporarily only during the Second World War for, as the bomber later explained, "patriotism." He became so much a part of the language of the city that when New Yorkers wanted to discipline their children, they would say, "Be good or the Mad Bomber will get you!" There was that. Who wouldn't remember that? But there was much more.

Historic Fraunces Tavern, where George Washington said farewell to his Revolutionary War troops, managed to stay intact for some 200 years until it was blown up for political reasons beyond what America's first president could have imagined. And then there was the bomb factory in peaceful, bucolic Greenwich Village, where anti-Vietnam War protesters accidentally blew themselves up in a gorgeous, expensive town house. They left a huge hole in a street full of other gorgeous, expensive town houses with their yards and look of home, rare enough in a city of apartment rooms.

There was the blowing up of one of the three major metropolitan airports. And the man who was standing right next to his own bomb on the overcrowded, speeding subway train when it went off. And the dumping of an explosive device on a busy Bronx street by a man who then shot himself because of a domestic dispute. And the bomb that mistakenly fell off the bottom of a woman's car instead of blowing her up, a *modus operandi* once reserved for the Mafia, but now could be merely a disgruntled neighbor. And the Zodiac Killer, assassinating people in Central Park according to his own horoscope, who told police he couldn't make up his mind whether he wanted to do that or become a mail bomber. And the giant concrete flower pots with no flowers blocking off the fronts of certain target buildings, so a car bomber could not ram into them. And the always and ever threats to bomb the underwater tunnels, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the Statue of Liberty every Fourth of July. And the several evacuations

of the United Nations building, and the World Trade Center.

The World Trade Center.

Regina once worked in the World Trade Center on the 32nd floor in one of the two 110-story towers. One day her assistant went out for lunch and shortly after called from a telephone on the street. "Get out of the building," she said, "The police and fire department are in the lobby evacuating each building floor by floor because of a bomb threat. Get out of the building now."

Regina had been peacefully rounding up some papers and felt in no danger at all. There were no alerts, and no warnings had been sounded. It seemed so far-fetched.

"Can't we wait until the firemen tell us to go..."

"No. They told me that they don't know which tower the bomb is supposed to be in, and they said with 220 floors and maybe 50,000 people it will take some time to reach the 32nd floor in our tower. So, come down now and tell everybody else. I'm serious," her frightened assistant said, "do it!"

Regina was in a quandary. Her assistant was a sensible person, yet Regina didn't want to go around the office like some "chicken little." Although it was true that the Pan Am building had been blown up recently, killing several people.

I'll just tell the president of the company, she said to herself, and then let him put into motion a way to get everyone out.

When she arrived at Mr. Pohl's office, he was gravely busy.

"Excuse me, sir, we have to leave the building. There is a bomb threat," she told him. He looked up at her with supreme annoyance as he slammed his palm down on the top of his desk and said in a high, brat-like voice: "No! Not today! I don't have time for that today!"

Mr. Pohl went back to his work without even the courtesy of rudely dismissing her. Regina began to get worried. If the man in charge would not take care of everybody, then they would have to take care of themselves. Her next move was to go from the top to the bottom and see Joe in the mailroom. A retired police officer, Joe managed to get all 100 employees of the small firm quickly down to the lobby ahead of schedule and out onto the street as the firemen were still working the lower floors.

There was no bomb.

Then.

She had personally experienced an empty threat and then watched horrified as eventually it turned into the unbearably real, deadly, thing.

Twice.

And forever.

CHAPTER TWELVE

i.

She wanted to be immortal. She thought it probably wasn't a good idea to tell this to the Bomb Guy.

Just another cliché.

Like thinking there was a genius hiding in her somewhere. For someone who longed to be extraordinary, it amazed her how ordinary she was, how right on track for being average, for the statistical middle, and for the meanness of the mathematical mean.

"My unremarkableness keeps weighing me down," she told Marius.

"It doesn't matter," Marius said, once dismissing what he thought were her pompous artistic strivings. "As far as I'm concerned, in the evolutionary process you and I are just part of the grand petri dish that a genius grows in. It's like sperm: millions for the one, and the rest discarded, wasted. That's most of us. So forget art; it's children that make you immortal," he reminded her whenever they discussed the subject.

Well, there hadn't been any and just as well, under the circumstances.

True, her mother could upset her by saying, "You should have children! It's nature's plan."

Nature's Plan? Passion. Sex. Nail Polish. All to drop babies.

"I don't care what nature wants," Regina told her. "Nature isn't that smart. Nature also wants disease, floods, and

animals who eat their prey alive. I don't want any of that either."

Regina was convinced she herself would have been a very bad mother. She kept secret that her skin actually crawled when she heard children's voices, that she hated those screechy sounds in restaurants, locker rooms, and swimming pools. She ducked for cover under the mushroom cloud of noise from schoolyards and playgrounds.

Maybe it wasn't the children themselves, maybe it was the life with children. Or maybe it was the parents. She felt most parents used their kids as an excuse to be rude, selfish, and inconsiderate to the rest of the world without consequence. In the name of children, too many sins were committed against adults.

"Well, who will worry about you when you are old!" her mother retaliated.

In spite of herself, Regina had once confessed these same fears to Doris, who pointed out: "Someone worrying about you doesn't make your life better. It only makes their life worse."

iii

Still, beyond her grandiose idea of immortality, it sometimes bothered Regina that by not having children she was the beginning of her own extinct species.

“Maybe Marius is right,” Regina told Doris, “ Maybe children do launch our own one-of-a-kind gene pool into infinity. Maybe we owe it to our parents, their parents, and the parents of those parents to keep them all alive too.”

Even though they provoked in her an acute melancholy, Regina loved old photos of dead people having good lives. Coming upon a group photo of her paternal ancestors could make her suddenly smile. But Regina knew that what was captured in the photo was not how each of the unknown relatives’ lives felt to them. From a photo, Regina would never be able to fully grasp that the glint in their eyes belonged to strangers who may have enjoyed being wrapped in warm sweaters, loved fruit and sunshine, were happy for the good fortune of friends, and had an unending stream of thoughts and feelings, just like everyone else. Their being dead now did not undo the fact that they had been alive then.

Regina often wondered where good, rich lives go when they are over, what the difference between a happy or unhappy life is, once it is gone. Too bad, she thought, that good lives couldn’t be saved, collected somewhere in the universe, permanently displayed in time. If only there were some kind of preservative, like shellac, that could be

sprayed over our great moments, to crystallize them into large murals and turn them into an eternal gallery of our lives.

Regardless, Regina thought, "There will be no great-grandchildren to put old photos of my former self on their dressers and mantles, and wonder, "Who was this woman? What was her life like? Look at those clothes! That hair! What funny furniture".

Fortunately, in these talks with herself, Regina would always come around again to believe that the real immortality was Art. That even if no one in the future ever heard of you, they could share with you how you saw the world, how your own life felt to you.

As yet unborn people would be able to see the inner and outer world you saw. They would be able to see it through your same eyes, even when you no longer existed. In a sense, through them, *you* would go on seeing forever. With Art, the future could see you, or hear you, or feel your heart, understand your mind.

Her work, not children, would have to do this for her.

But it never would.

History was against her. This strange time in which she was born, this period crossing the

Millenniums--- when even old words she knew...such as menu and concert...could confuse her with additional

meanings, and new words threw up a shifting verbal border between then and now as surely as stepping from land to water.

"I came too late at the end of everything and too early for the beginning of something else," she told Marius.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Bomb Guy sat down next to her. He looked like a math professor.

Regina felt foolish that she had half expected him to be wearing a flak jacket.

"No, I'm not the one who takes the bombs out to the field and blows them up," he said softly. "My job is to *evaluate* each incident where there is no immediate danger. If we felt there were real danger involved here, we'd already be working with the postal police."

"The post office has police.....?"

"Of course. In addition to tracking down scams, pornography, drugs, hazardous materials, and people who steal checks from mailboxes, they've got a lot of experience with this kind of thing.....but, no, we'll just keep an eye on it for now to see if it escalates...."

"Escalates...oh, it could escalate....?"

"Not necessarily...however....."

He paused and went on. "I'm sorry that Det. Walker is giving you the impression we are not taking this seriously. The detective uses a practical approach, but we, well, we're more philosophical. My feeling is that if we are right, we are right, but if we are wrong someone is dead."

"Oh....!"

The Bomb Guy made a calming gesture with his hand, like a conductor taking an orchestra to a pianissimo. "Let

me tell you straight off that bomb threats are a dime a dozen, so to speak....there are so many, that they become just background noise....."

Regina pretended to nod hopefully, ignoring the metaphor he obviously did not intend to make.

"If you knew about real bombers, you would know that you are not dealing with one."

Regina thought it was impossible to be so certain, but she would try to take any comfort she could get from anyone she could.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" he asked quietly.

She was grateful for a break to breathe.

"Yes, thank you."

With impressive dexterity, he made two cups from the surprisingly neat and well stocked coffee area at the end of the room, and since there was no desk where they were sitting, pulled over another chair to use as a coffee table, although both cups wobbled on it.

The Bomb Guy took a sip, then studied Regina's anxious face.

"Actually, we are a great nation for bomb threats. As well as for just scares and hoaxes. It's a very American thing to do."

"This is supposed to make me feel better?" Regina asked.

"While it's true that we have found bombs near Disneyworld, most bombs go off in Internal Revenue Service buildings. People don't seem to realize it, but as many people die by *trying to mail* a bomb as do by receiving one...a would-be-bomber can inadvertently set

one off with the static electricity generated from walking across a carpet on his way out the door to the post office, or by the warmth from the palm of his hand before he even reaches the mailbox. Not only that, but you have to be very organized to be a successful bomber. There are many steps involved: selection of a target, surveillance of a target, rehearsal and dry run, construction of device, planting of device, detonation of device, and exploitation of the act, meaning: what does he get out of it?"

He looked at her. Did he want her to answer? How would she know?

Regina could not touch her coffee.

"But don't you worry. We examined your package. It was empty and we are convinced nothing will happen to you. Who's doing it and why? Who knows?" he shrugged. "But it may not matter. The good news for you is that most serious bombers don't usually send a warning in advance."

She had heard all this before. Was this the party line? If enough people said it, could it be true? Did she believe him?

She really wanted to.

iii.

Sometimes Regina didn't mind being stuck in traffic. It gave her a chance to look around. Streets had meaning. Tourists could pop out of the subway onto any street and think it unremarkable. They wouldn't realize what role this street played in the general scheme of things.

A New Yorker would immediately know the spirit of every street. Know not just its physical location, but its relevance to the rest of the city, and what kind of life it had on its own.

On the street, New Yorkers were always in the middle of context.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In his little corner of the world, life was careless.

Inmates being released were searched in a very “relaxed” manner and could generally smuggle stuff out.

Including threatening letters without any disclaimer.

He usually pressured one of his out-going buddies to mail his letters for him. He never wanted the threats to come from the same place. Never mind from this place.

Some inmates refused: “Are you crazy! No way, man. They catch me, they put me right back in. I’m not taking chances for you!”

But most thought it was a last act of disrespect and revenge to fool the system that had taken away their freedom, and so took the letters and mailed them from their many different hometowns, or wherever they wound up.

Others took them out simply because they were dim-witted.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

i.

Now, on her way to meet her sister, Regina tried to escape the growing tightness that had begun to pinch her shoulders. It seemed important that she resist it, so she folded it into all the other moribund heaviness with which she beleaguered herself.

"Why did you wait so long to tell me!?" Nina asked. "I'm your sister. Why did I have to hear it from that what's-his-name detective guy."

"I know. I know." Regina said as she walked along New York's fabulous waterfront beside Nina's wheelchair.

New Yorkers can spit and hit water. Yet they usually don't have a clue. Don't realize they are island people; not just one island, but islands within islands, surrounded by islands. An archipelago. Most are not even aware that if you live in Manhattan you can watch the sun come up on one river and set on another.

"The police don't seem to be taking it seriously," Regina explained to her sister, "so I 'm trying not to either. I don't want to."

"Maybe they are taking it seriously now. That detective is coming to see me tomorrow."

"Actually I'm surprised he called. But he did ask for a list of all the people in my life--actually the closest people. Can you imagine! I told him they couldn't possibly be suspects. Couldn't possibly be!"

"He didn't say I was a suspect," Nina told her, "He just said he was trying to paint a 'rounded' picture of your life." Nina paused. Then added wryly, "That ought to be fun for him." Actually, Nina was aware that no one thought Regina was fun these days.

And no wonder: there was her "art" that no one could figure out; the ex-husband who kept the world spinning but not with her; the too-young man who could not measure up to fill the void; and her tendency to get lost in the cosmic questions that only disoriented her.

And possibly getting blown up with no one to believe her.

"I can't imagine" Regina said. "Walker is usually so un-engaged by my death, I don't think my life will be able to hold his attention either.

You know, it's kind of funny," Regina added, "how I thought the package looked so ordinary...it could have been my checkbooks, or make-up from Bloomingdale's, even prescription refills. Without the previous notes, I never would have given that package a second thought."

Regina's voice betrayed she was more shaken than she seemed.

"Of course not," Nina said. "Even so, you would think that after 9/11 they would be on your case 24/7."

"Well, maybe that is why they are not. There is a lot going on. And the notes do seem like a game. So far they have come from Texas, Vermont, and Idaho. I guess they need something more specific. And local."

They wandered out of the small garden area that looked over the river onto the sunny, open walkway where the

path gave way to a long shoreside promenade of trees, benches, outdoor sculptures and built-in chess tables.

Everywhere there were boats: sailboats, tug boats, barges, cruise ships, container ships, small oil tankers, yachts, sightseeing boats, kayaks, speed boats, Coast Guard cutters, and police boats.

People on the boats always waved, and on land they always waved back. New Yorkers become better people in a well-kept park.

And New Yorkers were always trying. How brave they were to plant their wistful groupings of pink and white impatiens around the trunks of puny trees on busy streets, their straggly vines in pots on fire escapes. Even the professionally planted tulips over the Park Avenue subway grates were impossible pioneers of spring, front soldiers in the hope for beauty, shot down by fumes and noise.

As they reached a bench, Regina sat at the very end so she could be next to Nina, who slowed the wheelchair down, made a wide circle backwards to face the water, got the small front wheels caught on the uneven ground, did the circle again. Then put the left brake on, then the right with her tight hands that the padded gloves only helped a little, all so she wouldn't roll on the slanting concrete. If she had to move, she would have to start the procedure over again.

After Nina got settled, Regina said, “ I think the scariest part so far was the sign I saw in the post office.”

"What sign?"

"Wait. Actually I copied it. It made me feel I wasn't crazy." Regina took out of her purse a small lined notepad, mostly used for grocery lists, on which she had hurriedly copied the sign before people waiting on the long post office line could get annoyed. "I hope I can read my own scribble," she said.

IMPORTANT CUSTOMER INFORMATION:

Because of heightened security, the following types of mail may not be deposited here:

- All stamped domestic mail weighing one pound or more.*
- All international mail and military APO/FPO mail weighing one pound or more.*

Please take this mail directly to a retail clerk at the counter. Thank you."

"So," Nina asked, "Post office procedure is to blow up the retail clerk? "

ii.

Regina sighed. She was ready to change the subject.

"Look at this," she said incredulously, waving to encompass all that was in front of them. They were facing the entire panorama of New York Harbor and the Statue of Liberty, the very picture on a million postcards.

"You can't buy this," Nina agreed.

No, you can't, Regina thought.

Instead, she said to Nina, "What you see is not the whole picture."

Once she had been out in that river on a funny-looking vessel, something like a backwards garbage truck, called the SWEEPMASTER, the harbor's version of a dustpan and broom. Its job was to clear the waters of floating debris, mostly to pulverize loose wood that had broken away from the piers and which could get caught up in the propellers of other ships.

Her job as art director was to oversee a fashion photo shoot where elegant dresses contrasted with the industrial mechanisms of this chewing boat. The boat crew was very excited having all the beautiful women aboard, as well as with the necessary incongruity of photo flashes going off in broad daylight. They were eager to impress the models.

"It's not just wood that we pick up," the Pilot explained, "We get anything near the top of the water that comes along. We get all kinds of things. You can't believe what we get. General household garbage, of course. Plastic containers, hospital waste, dead fish. dead cats and dogs.

Birds. They just get old or tired from migrating and fall out of the sky. Even snakes. Car parts. Bodies and body parts."

Just like that: bodies and body parts.

And now Regina scanned this glorious, peaceful scene, her sister Nina also lost in thought beside her, and knew that the two rivers surrounding this island, that New Yorkers were just beginning to use to heal their frazzled spirits, were not kind. That their lovely melody had an ominous sonority in the lower register, and that right at this moment both she and Nina might be looking at water which held the cumulative bodies and body parts of the toddler thrown in by his own mother; the missing little girl from Chinatown floating under a pier; the body of a woman found under the Brooklyn Bridge by two joggers; the parents stuffed in a shopping bag by their teenage children and shoved into the deep tides; the crew member who slipped off a barge near the Statue of Liberty; the steel worker who fell from a bridge; the kid swimming off sharp rocks who never came up; the foolish man swept away after he dived in to retrieve the disposable camera he accidentally dropped in the water at the South Street Seaport pier; the drunken high school student on prom night who jumped off a sightseeing boat on a dare; the man drowned on New Year's Eve; the suicides from ferries, piers, bridges; the severed foot found by a dockworker; the soaking suitcase with a dismembered woman, and the smiley faces left on the rocks where a serial killer dumped his victims into the river.

Sometimes these bodies swirled around in the river near crowded recreation areas at lunchtime. Or showed up at the foot of Wall Street, with no apparent affect on the stock market.

There were also the souls and bones of those drowned through the centuries, who by now would never recognize the city encircling their watery graves: Revolutionary War soldiers deliberately sunk on their prison ships by the winning British and whose remains bubbled up to the surface for decades following. They were joined, more than one hundred years later, by 900 happy picnickers, when their ferry, the General Slocum, sank between the two nearby shores of the narrow East River. They were all in there, in this splendid scene being enjoyed by Regina and her sister.

"But it still could be just a prank," Nina tried to reassure her," after all the box was empty."

"Yes. The bomb guy I talked to said its being empty was very 'existential.'"

Then Regina laughed, "This bomber nobody knows seems to have a more interesting personality than I do. 'Nuts, corny' *and* 'existential'.."

Nina said, "That's not so funny."

What was funny, as in incomprehensible, to Regina was

how the beautiful and ugly, good and evil, happiness and tragedy, unbridled freedom and paralyzing aloneness could be served up so relentlessly by her city on the same plate.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Each time Nina came home and closed the front door behind her, she felt as if she had just outrun wolves.

So difficult, dangerous, and at least psychologically life-threatening was the world the able-bodied had created for her to live in.

Nina wondered if places outside New York City had fewer mobility surprises. Her sister Regina thought that New York's surprises, with their constant physical chaos, were part of its charm, its own reward, its exotic excitement, like Cairo, or Rome, or all of India.

But for Nina, if her physical world was not completely perfect in every detail, it was all wrong. There was no middle ground. No stunning array of workable options.

Everywhere there were stairs, revolving doors, too narrow aisles in restaurants and shops, bathrooms she couldn't get into, or even get to. She was locked out of people's unworkable homes and apartments. "Eighteen inches is all you need to get around things," is the interior decorator's unfortunate rule of thumb.

As a result she was forced to roll through the world from obstacle to obstacle, like the ball in a pinball machine.

So Nina loved getting home to the place set up specifically for her, like a dress made to order.

But rarely was her world perfect, either outside or within, since perfection for Nina could actually be measured in inches. If something was an inch out of reach, or an inch too narrow, or too high or too low, or too far away in the kitchen, if something were moved even a bit, or was dropped, or put in the wrong place, or if she forgot to do it, or get it, while she was in a spot where she was able to, she was just out of luck. For her there were no simple misses; in her personal ecology system every mistaken inch was a mile.

In an irony she could not find amusing, the less she could move, the more movements it took to do something. So, she used her energies only on things that were significant. She weighed and measured carefully who she saw, where she went. If she had to climb the wall of disability, what was on the other side had better be worth it.

This shackling, this parsimony of options, was relatively new to Nina. Until recently, she had been up on her feet, walking through the world in her own peculiar way. Strong as an athlete and focused as a gymnast, she did what she wanted, went where she willed. But suddenly it all caught up with her; the old paralysis gained on her faster than she could outrun it. So here she was: instead of up on her feet, looking the world in its eye, she was now sitting in a chair looking at everyone's behind.

Still, she was aware that even now she did not have it so hard. She was glad she was not in some poor country where just simple living was impossible and disability was death or worse. Where she could have been crawling

through a barnyard on her knees. Or never seeing anything else in all her life but the walls of some dark back room. Considering how good she had it, if she complained, even to herself, she would only see herself as some sort of disability brat.

But none of this was on her mind today: Nina thought only about her sister.” Poor Regina, those bomb threats she receives are very frightening indeed. It must be shattering to live in a world where you never know what will happen next, and worry constantly that you’ll be unprepared to survive whatever it is.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

i.

"So what do you think...." Det. Walker asked Nina,"....think your sister could be setting up this bomb thing...or whatever the hell it is....herself? ...All artists are a little strange as far as I'm concerned...so maybe...I don't know...maybe she's doing it for the attention...like the guy who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge because nobody would pay any attention to his plays. He lived, but as far as I know, his plays died."

Det. Walker was always amused by himself. He did not amuse Nina.

She knew Regina did no such thing. Although, Nina did believe her sister was slightly delusional when it came to her "art." She thought Regina merely had a craft that she mistook for a talent.

"You," Nina said to Walker, "are a moron."

"Now, that's not going to help your sister," he said.

"You're not helping my sister," Nina replied. "Somehow you seem to think this is not a serious matter, that she is not being seriously threatened. And I don't understand why."

"Because real bombs are going off all over the place. We're thinking this thing of your sister's is a little goofy."

"Goofy!! If you think it's so 'goofy', why are you here,...wasting my time with your snide indifference" She was

goaded into rudeness by her sister's frustration and disrespect for this man. "....And apparent incompetence!" Det. Walker had been so taken aback by Nina from the first moment she opened the door, putting him off balance by making him look down and seeing her sitting there in her flowered sundress, looking freshly showered, hair still wet , skin still dewy, that—surprisingly-- nothing she could say made him angry. In fact he would be shocked at himself if he had any inkling why this was so.

Nina's first reaction to another person generally was hostility, trained into it by strangers who usually meant trouble of one kind or another for her, who always required some sort of stressful negotiation to compensate for their mutual mobility differences. Two minutes with the able-bodied could make Nina cranky as hell. She had no reason to believe this detective would be an exception.

But, in fact, her difficult, confrontational manner mysteriously excited Walker, unaware as he was of scientific findings that the sting of psychic friction between the sexes was a kind of passionate irritant that often made testosterone levels go up in men. Walker simply believed that sparring with Nina, a game which he thought he would surely win, could be fun. Like the snarling flirtation of jungle cats. He did not know that soon he would be driven into emotional territory far more dangerous than he could imagine, or ever want to handle.

For now, however, he turned to the familiar gimmick he often used to regain control by taking a minute to work his watch. It was made of cold chrome and was threateningly

enormous on his wrist, with almost as many controls as the cockpit of an airplane. To see the time, he first had to snap open a thick leather lid which covered the watch face, no doubt to protect it just in case his forearm was attacked by a ferocious animal deep in the African bush.

Snap. Open. Push one button once to see the time. Push another button once to see the day. Push the first button twice to see seconds count off. Snap. Lid closed. Slightly later, open, snap, push time, push, push day, snap.

It annoyed almost everyone who knew him.

But on the job its excuse for silent deliberateness succeeded in intimidating the already guilty.

Nina thought it was ridiculous.

"...anyway," Det. Walker continued, "maybe your sister isn't doing it for artistic attention.. Maybe it's for attention closer to home. I hear she is divorced. Maybe she wants her husband back. I could understand that."

"Look, Det. Walker," Nina said, "my sister is not doing 'it' at all. The sooner that path is quit, the sooner you may be able to get on the right one."

"And what is the right one?"

"Of course I have no idea. But I can guarantee that she, me, her friends, relatives, lovers, and ex-husband have nothing to do with it."

"Guarantee? And just how do you do that?"

Nina threw up her hands, resigned. "Since you are already here, what can I do to help you solve this puzzle."

Det. Walker was actually taking this more seriously than he said. Sometimes these "goofy" situations provided leads to other important cases. You never knew. But now he had two separate problems to outflank: the would-be bomber and his exciting yet uncomfortable pull toward Nina. He would have to think up a plan to combine strategies.

"Oh, we're not going to solve it."

"Not solve it?! Why?!"

"Without luck, that is...or a mistake...."

"The mistake could be that my sister is killed!"

"No. That won't happen. I guarantee this is someone just toying with her."

"Guarantee? And just how do you do that?"

ii.

Michael Walker was always in the way of his own message.

But only when he came out of disguise.

Like many who feel awkward and unworthy to take part in an overrated society, Michael Walker used his profession as the vehicle to automatically transport himself into other people's lives. He hid behind his detective shield the way a photographer hides behind a camera, or a reporter behind the power of the media. Their secret hope is that the doors into the lives of the accomplished or famous, which ordinarily would remain closed to them as the faulty individuals they are, will gladly open to usher them in, in the role their careers gave them.

Walker was always in danger of becoming less than he seemed when he left his profession to wade into the treacherous shoals of his private inner life. So he seldom did. Even his wife had to put up with that. But Nina was about to cut off Samson's hair. Not on purpose, of course. She had no idea any of this was going on.

Walker seemed to love it that Nina was so unsoothingly direct. It made them exciting foes, possibly on the edge of becoming pals. But for as long as she was determined to take the upper hand in this connecting conflict, Walker was going to fight it. It had to be a control thing. To keep his strength he would have to maneuver himself as far back into his detective-ness as he could get. For protection. And power.

But Nina had her own power. When you tell the truth to a manipulator, he becomes slightly afraid. Where is the trap? After all, who tells the truth!? Certainly not Walker who believed honesty gave other people too much warning.

He needed to know Nina better. Experience taught him that the more he knew about his opponent, the less threatening the situation could be. In his work it was a matter of life and death to know if the figure in the dark hallway had a gun, if the informant bringing you the drug bust had set you up. Or if the woman who was making you dizzy had the antidote, hidden away in the deep recesses of her life, and all you needed to do was find it to be cured. Where did Nina keep those metaphorical scissors?

"So you're Regina Parker's sister," he asked. "Are you a Parker, too"?

He hadn't seen a wedding ring.

"No," Nina answered, surprised at the question, "that's our maiden name. Regina went back to it after the divorce." Although out of character for Nina, she went on. She chalked it up to hoping. she could give him just enough information so he would leave.

"I've kept my late husband's name," she said, "It's the simple way to deal with the world....passports, banks, the IRS, condo documents...."

Walker studied the large and meticulously furnished apartment. "Looks like you were left pretty well off," he remarked inappropriately.

Det. Walker sat across from her in an ungainly manner, knee to knee, both ankles turned in and feet flared out, his body hunched forward as if he were about to dance the Charleston from a seated position. He seldom realized how unattractive he was.

Others could tell from the way he walked, moving from the waist down, carrying his upper body almost separately, and from the way that he ate a hot dog, his hand taking the bun by the throat as if strangling it as he held it close to his face and his mouth coming out to meet it, even though his lips were already full of the bite he had already taken, that he was probably immoral.

"Tell me," he suddenly said, "does your sister get a lot of phone calls where they just hang up?"

"I don't know."

"Is your sister into drugs?"

"No!"

"A love triangle?"

"No!"

"Any bad deals with money? Is she a political radical, or against any ethnic or religious group?"

"No! No! No! Can't you ask a serious question! How does your continuing to be preposterous help my sister?"

"Oh, everything helps."

"You're a fool," Nina said, rolling toward the apartment door with the clear intent of opening it to let him out.

Fearing she may have gone too far, she quickly tried to pull back by saying, "Sadly, that seems to be all we have. Myself included."

Walker's heart skipped again. Here was another way Nina's net tugged at him. He had always imagined a lover who could share his contempt of the world. Himself included.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

i

Michael Walker's wife was always looking out for what was best for her. Not only in an overall way--everyone does that. Human beings will get away with as much as they possibly can. Even those who care for each other. Det. Walker was well aware of that. But what bothered him about his wife was how she did it. It was as if she had been a deprived child and still felt the need to elbow her way to what she thought was more than her fair share.

She was the woman on line in a crowded supermarket who would deliberately put a few things down at the checkout counter, and once the register was open and holding her place, would go back and forth to pick up more items, making everyone wait so she wouldn't have to. She sold her old, used clothes instead of giving them away.

She put information and opportunities out of the reach of others in case she wanted them for herself later, to be sure that nothing she could have would ever be kept from her. It was as if failing to be alert to the most she could get for the least she could give, would do her irreparable harm. She tried to make it seem as if she wanted nothing, but not so mysteriously, she wound up with everything.

Walker hated how his wife slipped back and forth between this staunch grabby-ness to the whiny, helpless creature who couldn't decide what to eat in a restaurant. She could switch from the set jaw of the hoarder to a bright face

falsely interested in others, with a velocity that could make an observer a little seasick.

She was manipulative, but not as manipulative as Walker, which he told himself, after all, was his profession. He believed his was a subtle virtue and that his wife's was a crass vice. This did not sit well with him. Neither did their marriage.

So, Walker had been back twice to see Nina, ostensibly about the notes.

"Why hasn't he been to see me instead," Regina asked her sister, "Or at least to see me *also*?"

"I don't know," Nina said. "I get the impression he thinks you may have something to do with it....for attention or sympathy from Marius..."

"He's a moron!!"

"I told him that," Nina said, "...but he just seemed to enjoy it."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The prison was in upheaval and locked down after the violence in the cafeteria, so he decided to take a break and temporarily re-group before sending Regina any more “love letters.”

It wasn't the fear of getting caught that made him careful, or at least as careful as he could be under the circumstances. It was just that if they found him out they would stop his only fun.

So, of course, he never left fingerprints. He was never foolish enough to wear attention-getting gloves; besides where would he get them. Instead, he used the hem of his shirt around his fingers. It just looked as if he were drying his hands on his own clothes. It made his fingers a bit clumsy, but with patience he found a method to use self-stick stamps, and moisten the envelopes with water instead of licking them, and write with his wrong hand in a phony slant.

He supposed if someone out there tried hard enough they might track him down, but he knew no one would try that hard. How much police work were they going to put into a few women making complaints about something that never happens.

And even if they did try, the odds were still in his favor. At full throttle, they were lucky to find anyone, even when it

was vitally important, like a known serial bomber, or a threat to national security.

But he decided to keep a low profile anyway until everything calmed down.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“I need to talk to you...” Walker said to Nina over the phone, “...but...listen...I don’t want to get your sister’s hopes up...so you have to promise not to tell her about this....I need you to come to the station house and look at mug shots to see if you recognize anyone...from suspected bombers in other cases...who might have been in her vicinity...”

“ But the threats came from all over the country.”

“Well, the guy might have been in her vicinity at one time. Somebody she said ‘no’ to in the wrong way... who can’t take rejection. Sometimes that’s all it takes, the obsession follows them.

Maybe one of these guys was around her once on one of her jobs, since she goes to different places. Or at a party that you might have attended, too...”

Nina was about to protest, but then thought the idea was not so far-fetched.

“I would bring the photo books to you but there are too many of them.”

That was not true. None of it was true.

“I can help you,” Walker continued, “ in and out of the car. It shouldn’t take too long.”

Nina decided to wait for him at the curb. She hoped he would not be late. She was always in danger, sitting there alone in her wheelchair, of people eventually dropping money into her lap.

But she didn't want Walker in the house again. She couldn't put her finger on it. Something made her uneasy. So, as uncomfortable as it was, waiting at the curb was better.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Walker had a slight problem putting the wheelchair in the trunk of the car. He was at a loss how to fold and lift it, and even with Nina's instructions he seemed to turn it into a living thing that fought back.

"It's awkward, I know," Nina said, "and probably heavy."

"It's not heavy; I'm just out of shape." Walker laughed nervously, looking for a compliment.

"I sure hope you don't have to chase any bad guys," was all she would give him.

"Where exactly are we going?" Nina asked after he managed to jerk the car back and forth, inch by inch, out of a bumper-to-bumper parking space and head in, what seemed to Nina, the opposite direction from where she thought they were going.

"That's the thing," Walker said. ". ...there's been a change in plans..."

Nina sat up straighter into her seat belt.

"..oh, don't worry..." Walker had looked forward to this reaction, "...nothing serious....just a little detour. It won't take much time. I have to stop by court to sign a statement before a judge on an old case that goes before her tomorrow..." He was making it up as he went along.

"You know how it is. The law is the law."

"Is it on our way?"

"Not exactly..."

"Well, where is it?"

"Queens."

“Queens! You’re taking me to Queens when your precinct is just across town!? You can’t make decisions on your own like that about what you do with my time!”

“Relax. It will be fun.”

“I don’t want it to be fun!”

“Well, we’re here now, ready to try and make some headway on your sister’s case. Don’t blow it, just because we have to circle around and make a quick stop.”

“I don’t call going through the Midtown Tunnel to an entirely different borough ‘circling around’.”

Walker laughed. Nina went seethingly silent. He let her stew. They drove surprisingly fast down Second Avenue until, like gophers, they scurried through the tunnel that took them from the ritzy apartments of Manhattan’s eastside, under the river in one of several life-giving arteries that tethered the islands of New York to each other, over to the low-level industrial sites of Queens. Walker drove fast enough to be outside the law.

“Can’t you slow down?” she said.

“Actually, I’m thinking of putting on my siren so we can go faster, since you indicated that you were in a hurry for one reason or another.”

“I’m no longer in a hurry.”

It was just what Walker needed. “Glad to hear it. Since it’s such a nice day, let’s check out the ocean at Jones Beach.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Walker did put on the siren and once outside the tunnel tried to speed along the Long

Island Expressway, also known as The Longest Parking Lot In The World. They were slowed down by nearly stationary traffic, but the ear-splitting noise and the manic flashing red light made Walker's car a self-contained ball of mayhem, and helped him lurch back and forth from lane to lane to lane toward the Southern State Parkway and the stretch of sand dunes along the Atlantic Ocean.

"This is kidnapping."

"No it's not. That would make me a criminal, but that can't be true since I'm an officer of the law."

Actually, it was a beautiful day. Having to go to the station house with Walker originally annoyed Nina, but the beach on a bright blue-sky morning was another story. They could smell the salt air even before the tall, wavy sea grass began to appear on the side of the road. They crossed another bridge and drove to a sandy indentation where the dunes were low and they could face the beach and the rolling waves. The sign said No Standing Anytime. Walker stopped there, turned off the car and opened all the windows. It was glorious.

For a moment.

Then Walker suddenly reached across her lap and unbuttoned the bottom button of her sweater.

Nina flinched.

"People of the highest class know it is bad taste to keep the bottom button buttoned," he said.

For some strange reason he seemed to want to teach her how to dress. Nina was speechless.

For a moment.

“Of all the inane, controlling, superficial arrogance from a man with no manners, no style, and apparently no brains....” She rebuttoned the sweater. “Let’s go.” she said. She didn’t have much hope of that, and after all what could she do to make him? And if he wouldn’t go, she couldn’t get out of the car to leave him.

Walker tried to kiss her. She pushed him away with all the force of her arms, made strong and muscular from years of doing more than their share of forced exercise. Even so, she would not have been able to move him if his approach had not been tentative. Walker certainly had no intention of fully forcing himself on her.

“What are you doing???!!!! Aren’t you supposed to be protecting me from people like you!”

Walker laughed sheepishly. Rebuffed. “I’m not going to do anything. It’s just that....you are just so strangely attractive to me.... Even I don’t understand it... .I took a chance....I thought.... since I know you wouldn’t get away...”

There it was: the geisha syndrome, the love of female feebleness, feet bound so they too could not get away. Bondage. Control. Imprisonment. Law enforcement. Nina would never let him have the control he wanted. It was one of the things she could not let men have. Not the scary men who insisted on kissing her in elevators

because she was trapped there. Not the silly men who ordered her to always wear something red.

Walker saw that Nina was repulsed. He couldn't stand that. But he could not really explain what was pushing him towards her. "No, I'm sorry...I don't mean...Look, I started this wrong, but can't we...I mean, I really would like to be involved with you, get to know you, be with you..to help you...."

"You're married."

Walker said nothing. Nina hoped he was not another man who would try to convince her that he realized he didn't even *like* his wife as she was walking down the aisle. Then she added, "And to me a wedding ring is the O in 'nO'."

But she lied to him. Nina was not concerned about getting involved with married men. The truth was she had once been very big on other people's husbands. Even though she shared the same DNA as Regina, Nina had much different ideas about love than her sister, who was still mooning over that kaleidoscope of contradictions who was her ex-husband. "Married men are a single girls most valuable resource," Nina once cruelly told her, when Regina confided about Marius' infidelity.

Married men were drawn to Nina like free money. She was so un-wifely. They did not have to live with her, so they could enjoy her challenging ways, and sharp tongue. What did she care what she did or said, she wasn't auditioning for a permanent position. So she operated with a reckless

emotional freedom that seemed to create for men a kind of intimacy of its own.

In spite of her brief marriage, Nina felt she had been single all her life, and still was, as opposed to the reality of being husbandless through widowhood. Her husband had been an unexpected blip on the cardiogram of her largely unconventional love life. He came, confused everything, then disappeared out of the world, leaving her back where she started.

"Don't you feel guilty?" Regina asked her on those occasions when Nina, for one reason or another, told her sister that she had taken up an affair with a married man, which she never initiated .

"Don't you owe anything to the wife? It could have been you, you know,"

"Couples don't take their vows in three's," Nina told her, "so what has it got to do with me? I didn't make promises to either one of them."

But in truth she had gotten bone tired of married men, their sneaky unsureness, the guilty reluctance that traveled alongside their propelling passions, so that every encounter was like watching an animal in the wild eat: they would take a bite and quick look over their shoulders. She had gotten tired of the drunken calls in the middle of the night after, sometimes, years of silence. "I love you. I love you."

And they would cry.

Tired of their adolescent confusion and emotional greed: "You know what I wish?" one of them told Nina as he was

hurriedly putting on socks to catch the next train back to the suburbs, "I wish I could bring you home with me and we could all live together." He seemed to mean it, but Nina knew that the only things she would get from him were an umbrella and a shoehorn left behind.

She was tired of the inventive lying---of the man who would send theater tickets to one of her friends, his mistress, so she could be in the same audience as he and his wife, in order that all three could share the same experience. And if they couldn't enjoy commenting to each other directly as the play unfolded, well, at least they could briefly catch each other's eye in the lobby as the wife, innocently unaware, chatted with friends.

Tired of watching suburban families ice-skating together on bright winter Sundays: Nina knowing that devoted father, comfortable husband was no doubt also another person, a stranger to this same family, living a lie with the people closest to him, forcing on them a false life and the waste that comes with it, his betrayal shrinking all their other possibilities as they lived in a land of their own making, all the major landmarks left off the map, taking them far afield of where they thought they were headed and where they would have chosen to be.

Some of it she understood. Nina knew that when you live with someone you lose appreciation for their best traits; that a wife, the woman who knows a man as well as himself, would have to become both ally and enemy. She knew that married men love their wives for their familiarity and their history, but get bored with them for the same

reasons: that they love their mistresses for their mystery and uninvolved, but are removed from them for the same reasons.

No, she was not afraid she would get involved with Walker. Nor was she concerned with protecting the sanctity of his marriage. That was his job. In any case, Walker's timing was bad.

His married predictability made her skin crawl.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

i.

It used to be that when Regina had any contact with Marius she would sob all afternoon, and drink beer with Oreo cookies.

She didn't do this anymore; he had lost that part of his hold on her.

But after a much-welcomed and almost reassuring long period of silence from whomever it was who wished her harm by blowing her up, suddenly finding the new envelope, stuck in the threshold of her loft door, actually slipped by hand halfway under it, with just a newspaper article about a family recently killed by a letter bomb, drove her right back to him.

There were no stamps on the envelope and no postmark. It was a plain, ordinary #10 letter envelope, nothing elaborate. With only her name typewritten on it—not even her address-- and no note inside.

Just the article, with its overt menace.

Hand-delivered.

As never before.

SOON I WILL BLOW YOU UP, the first note from Texas warned. But what would it mean to her safety now with the ominous article... not from far away Texas... but right on her front door step?

It was logical for her to assume that the person threatening her was right where she was, and pushing the threat into the very specific sanctuary of her life.

Regina thought: Everybody's days flip through the cosmic calendar to death. But it is one thing to know everybody dies, it is another to know it is going to be you. "Oh, you mean *me*?!"

ii.

What was it that people counted on everyday that made life so important to them, made them want to cling to the good solid earth? Did they understand how much misplaced faith they put in this globe of molten liquid and flaky pie crust where nothing was stable, where the inner core sped faster than the outside, where even the continents wandered? Where our life-sustaining star threw temper tantrums of dangerous solar flares, and meteorites collided like billiard balls. Never mind bomb threats; the galaxy itself was untrustworthy.

But before worrying about the cosmic implications of being dead, she first had to worry about dying. Regina could not get her brain around the idea of “not here *anymore*.”

She remembered what a friend said would be the worst thing for him about being dead.

"I would miss getting my mail."

She had never dwelled for very long on her own death to actually be afraid of it. But these recent events made her acutely aware of its possible suddenness.

When would it happen? Would it really be fast? Would the bomb ruin her paintings? Did she actually wish--BANG! and it's all over? But did she want it to be all over? There was a relief in having it be over. But why was that? Could it be she under-appreciated her life? No, maybe she didn't want it to be sudden, afterall. Death when you least expect it can be undignified...make a fool of you. You could be

found in a ludicrous, maybe even ugly, position that you would never want to be found in life.

A reporter friend once told her that when he was covering the murder of a woman killed in a Central Park bathroom, what stayed with him was not the young, pretty, half-naked girl on the dirty tile floor, not the whimpering, now abandoned little dog she had obviously been walking, but the two brown turds she had just left in the toilet.

No, sudden death was too ungraceful.

But was that the worst thing about it?

Regina concluded the worst thing would be the regret. Regret for the loss of her unduplicatable past, present, and future. Regret for the extinguishing of her particular flame, for a life come and gone without even casting a shadow, for the way the living discount the dead, thinking of them as an old idea, as failed survivors. Regina secretly felt superior to the dead, as though they had foolishly opened the wrong door.

“I’m going to hate being dead!” she thought. “I miss myself already.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

After Regina found the frightening article hand-delivered to her front door, she reluctantly called Det. Walker.

She did not want to.

Especially since her sister revealed how he had harassed her, even though Regina knew Nina could hold her own.

But she had to.

Det. Walker did not seem surprised to hear from her, and with as little conversation as possible said he would send Det. Angela Vega right away to pick up the envelope. He told her not to handle it too much.

Regina did not want to be hysterical, but having these two law officers of questionable concreteness at hand did not help her.

So she called Marius.

When Marius finally picked up the phone, after his new secretary—who, like all the others, was a little closer to him than she should have been--- maliciously put her on hold for five minutes, she just blurted out everything. She had not wanted to sound so alarmed. She had planned to be more subtle and appealing, especially after not speaking to him for so long, but his voice triggered her new desperation. And perhaps some old as well, which is really what she did not want him to hear.

"I just need you now," she told him.

Marius said he would come as soon as it was possible for him to get away.

Like most men when you need them, he would be there right away if sex were involved. Since Regina was not sleeping with him anymore, she would have to wait awhile longer.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Regardless of anything that had gone between them, to Regina Marius was still physically attractive; his body was her dear old friend. She couldn't stop the gladness that washed over her just seeing again that craggy, brown-eyed face; his familiar and welcome smell, and the comfort and security of the problem-solving life force standing at the door.

She introduced him to Det. Angela Vega.

Marius tried to be lighthearted so his concern would not make Regina's fears worse.

"This is probably some poor man whose heart she's broken and who wants more attention because she's ignoring him," Marius offered Angela.

"Do you think so?" Angela asked. "That's often the case."

"Of course not." Regina said. Then she couldn't resist adding for Marius' sake: "There is no man interested in me who is not getting my full attention."

"Well, I don't know...." Marius said, "you know how you are....."

Regina noticed that Marius could keep even Angela quiet. He was wiry, energetic and couldn't sit still. He wandered around Regina's loft straightening things out, picking things up and investigating them out of an idle and distracted curiosity, making some remark totally off the

subject at hand, checking her books, talking about the authors, and finally telling Angela:

" You have to have someone watch her. You have to put a cop on her, day and night. Listen, this may not be just her. Maybe it's someone you need to catch for other bombings."

"This is not a bombing," Angela reminded him, " this is a newspaper article."

He was furious. "...Yes!...About a bombing!!," he yelled at Angela, " Of course, it's a bombing...or a near bombing... or a plan to bomb....!"

Marius turned to Regina: "You have to move. Detective, tell her she has to move...You should get a dog. It could alert you, so you could avoid the danger altogether. You know, they train dogs who can detect nearly 20,000 different types of explosives. They never fail, right, Detective? Look, Regina, I'll help you...." His cell phone rang. It was his office.

"I have to go . I'll call you. Listen to what I told you. Detective, tell her I'm right."

He hugged Regina swiftly. "I don't think your people are doing their best for her," he shot at Angela, as he went out the door.

Angela saw Regina's face crumble.

"Is that ok, his leaving?" she asked, " If you want, I can get him back here..."

Regina shook her head, "No."

If he's gone, she thought, I don't have to watch him not love me.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Some people think too big a deal is made out of unfaithfulness. They must, since so many people do it.

Countries like France and Italy institutionalize it.

Regina was not sure how she felt about unfaithfulness. Certain promises you can't expect other human beings to keep, even if they believe they can.

"Hell," she thought, "I can't even keep my own promises to myself."

Regina was not sure why his unfaithfulness started.

A centuries' old folk wisdom says that when a man strays, there is something wrong at home.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

Regina knew of other men's excuses that ranged from:

"She wore her hair short when I liked it long."

"She wouldn't take time to iron my shirts."

"She wore dowdy clothes."

Regina knew these men would be unfaithful anyway, however willing their wives were to accommodate them. Because the only thing "wrong" at home was that their wives had been seen by them too often.

Yet that did not seem to be her problem. To the contrary, Marius made her feel loved. When he told others how much he loved her, tears came to his eyes. And he was full of surprises, leaving funny notes for her on her car, sending postcards from the city they were already in. He made up little jokes between them. And offensive,

loving nicknames. He phoned her at the office all day, as if he could not be away from her too long, as if she were not only important, but necessary.

He let her make the mistake, as so many women do, of believing intense attention is lasting love.

But Marius seemed to love everyone who fell within the circle of his enthusiasms, for as long as that particular enthusiasm lasted. He did not notice the contradiction between his eager presentations and lack of follow through. Or more simply put: the number of promises not kept.

Not on purpose. He wanted to be that strongly taken with something, but it couldn't always hold him. Once he had completed a transaction to his satisfaction---building a house, a business, a love affair—he needed to leave it and start the process all over again.

Nina called him “a possibilities junkie.”

Regina felt it was not entirely satisfying to share with Nina her attempts and failures to keep Marius' attention. Considering Nina's own approach to love.

“Nobody can take all of you even if you give it to them,” Nina told her sister “It's too much; it would be like actually living in Venice.”

Regina was familiar with too much and too close. She was aware if you get too close to something, its nature changes. Sit too close to the stage at the ballet and all the thumping on boards is louder than the music. Sounds like a creaky gymnasium. Or at a concert? You can hear the players spit and wheeze into their instruments.

The magic goes.

Nina was often upset to see Regina's futile efforts to be more of what Marius wanted---needed. Over the years she tried to caution Regina from going too far down that path.

"If you live for others, there's no guarantee you'll make their life better, and it's possible your own life will be lost in the process. So isn't the only life you can do something about, worth polishing to its finest sheen?"

Regina had always been resistant to anything that might pull her further away from her still cherished closeness with Marius.

"I do not like to think of love as a contest between two separate, highly-polished lives."

"Be that as it may," Nina said, "but if a man makes a woman disappear from herself, who would it be that loved him?"

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

"Walk with me," Angela said when she saw how upset Regina was at Marius' leaving. "I need to talk to you a bit more. Besides, you look like you could use some fresh air."

Regina hesitated. She was torn between keeping her privacy or needing a little comfort, even though she didn't think Angela would be the person to get it from.

But seeing Marius always left her a little shaky and unable to operate in her own best interest. "I'm ok. It's just hard to understand"

"Understanding is overrated," Angela interrupted.

Detective Vega's offer of a walk was tempting. Regina thought it might help to distance herself from Marius' visit, which seemed to have backfired from her original intent.

She picked up her purse and a heavy sweater. It was too beautiful a day for such upsetting events. As soon as they stepped out of the building into the warm afternoon breeze, they could feel the vague ocean smell that proved winter was gradually turning into spring. In New York City, you could often feel a smell, especially this ocean-created odor, which had an element of satin and salt being stroked across your face. Angela was quiet for the few seconds it took them to get their first whiffs of this sweet air. Then she started abruptly, as if a t.v. had suddenly turned on.

"Sometimes people do things that are good for you, and sometimes these same people do things to you that are

bad. We think because they did the good thing, they can't be doing the bad.

We throw away a lot of important information that way."

She briefly checked out Regina to see her reaction as they continued down the industrially-zoned street, where there was not one single tree. Fortunately, they could turn a few corners and find a row of old houses with a tree in front of each, and down a couple of blocks more there was a little café with rickety tables outside on a relatively quiet street. Still not entirely convinced about eliminating "the husband" as a suspect, Angela continued, " We wouldn't want to throw away any important information now, would we?"

Regina knew she had always thrown away good information about Marius. In fact, she had thrown away the piece of information most important of all: that she was only his "good enough wife," and that throughout the marriage he was merely waiting---whether he knew it or not—for the woman who would fall right into his fantasy vision of the wife he really wanted, the way Cinderella's foot fell right into the shoe.

Angela asked, " Can you come up with anything that would show us it's him?"

Should Regina tell her, "The way he loved me seemed unshakeable. Turned out that wasn't the way he loved me."

Instead, she answered pointedly. " It's not him. I told you it's not him." She was sure of this.

Angela finally paused in front of the little neighborhood café they had been walking towards. "Seems warm

enough to be outside for a change....” Angela said. “What do you think? You want to keep on walking, or have a cup of coffee and a little something.....?”

Angela sat down.

“This is nice, just the two of us, sweetie,”

Regina flinched. Angela’s loud, overly-resonant voice grated against this unwelcome salutation.

Det. Vega continued, “ I never go out to eat with the guys at the station. It's awful. Every time we go to a restaurant all they ever talk about is what they are eating while they are eating it. And about every other meal they ever ate in every other restaurant they ever ate in. Or ever will. It's absolutely surreal. You could go nuts.

Excuse me, waiter.....

Must be an actor, that guy. We're the only ones here and he's so overwhelmingly busy talking to the waitress--excuse me, female member of the wait staff--that he hasn't the strength to push himself away from the wall he's leaning against and come over here.

Let's just see how long it takes him to become conscious.

We could just up and leave.

Ok, no. You're right. Why should we be the ones put out...

Oh, finally.....

Excuse me, could we please have menus?

Thank you.

Nice selection for a tucked-away little place.

Not that we'll ever get to order anything, since he seems to have disappeared, and with his track record so far, maybe never to reappear again.

Another reason I don't like to eat with the guys at the precinct is that they are such cowards when it comes to waiters. They take all kinds of abuse.

Not me. I won't put up with it. Incompetence and carelessness rob time out of my life.

But this guy's not worth fighting with.

Although I haven't had a fight in a long time...

I find that if I don't have a fight now and then, I'm like a man without sex.....

What are you going to have, sweetie?"

Sweetie, again.

Regina thought. What is it, some sort of code word among law enforcement agents, some way they see anyone needing their attention as children? Regina didn't know what she wanted to eat since every thought she had about anything was sliced in half by Angela's interruptions. Trying to bring the halves together again was exhausting, especially in her frame of mind. She didn't have the strength. Maybe if she didn't really pay any attention to her.....

Angela got up abruptly and started looking on all the empty tables. Finally she went inside and came out with some toothpicks. She held one up with great satisfaction. "I never have to worry about being hungry because I always carry a second meal between my teeth."

A pale young man with two small briefcases sat down by himself at the table furthest from them. He opened up one case and took out a laptop computer. When a waitress

came, he asked for coffee, a Portobello mushroom sandwich on foccacia bread, and an ash try.

"I hope that guy doesn't think he is going to smoke," Angela said.

"Isn't it against the law?" Regina asked. "You could arrest him." She was kidding.

"No, I couldn't. And, boy, I hate that! You know, if they put that poison from second-hand smoke in a drink and handed it to you in a glass, they'd be charged with attempted murder."

Regina saw she was going to be sorry for encouraging Angela on any subject.

When the ashtray came, the young man opened his second briefcase, took out a large sheaf of papers held together in various sections with lots of paper clips. As he went through each section, he took the paper clips off and put them in the ash tray until he finished making notes on the computer. Then he clipped that section back together again and put those papers away in the case.

Since Angela could no longer relish the anticipation of being annoyed by him, she returned her attention to Regina. "You don't have much to say, sugar."

Sugar !

"I used to think I had a lot to say," Regina replied pointedly.

"Then I realized it has all been said before,"

Regina hoped Angela would come to the same conclusion. It was a hope that would never be realized.

She did not get a chance to stop Angela in time, who went on, oblivious that Regina's silence was censure.

"So, are you becoming convinced now that finding the newspaper article right under your very door *is* from someone you know, like the husband or boyfriend? Always the number one suspects. We are right more times than not about this. You should start to believe us. It may not even be about you. I suspect to most guys even you are not about you... because neither the husband or the boyfriend is going to love you for what you love about yourself...the things you love about your life. They can't. They would never even see it, and if they saw it, never understand it, and if they understood it, they would resent it. "

Regina wanted to say she resented the way the police kept dropping the ball regarding her possible untimely death, just as this inappropriate and presumptuous conversation was proving. And even though a combination of emotions had left her a little deflated and hesitant, she continued to defend both Marius and Drew.

"It has to be justa bad guy.... ," she tried, "who picked me out for some unfathomable reason," Regina said, "It has to be some unknown criminal!"

"Unfathomable until we know why, and unknown until we know who. Forget criminals. *If* it turns out not to be anybody you already know, then it could be just anybody. 'Just people,' as they say."

Regina thought on this point the detective could be right. From her own observations she

knew that if you ever wanted to fully understand the extent to which 'just people' truly do not care if they harm another, you only have to watch them drive a car.

TWENTY-SEVEN

"So how come you two are still friends?" Angela asked on their way back to Regina's loft where she would leave her. "Who?"

"You and the....husband."

Why indeed. Regina felt she had already shared too much. The last thing she wanted was to encourage a chummy rapport with this rather bizarre, overly talkative woman. She needed Detective Angela's professionalism, such as it was, but did not want to become her pal.

Yet this very question of her continued need for Marius in the face of his increasing indifference haunted Regina, went on in her mind in an unending loop. It might be a relief to say its absurdity out loud, let it hit the wall of another person and see if it stopped in its tracks. To hear how it sounded might be enough to spill it out of her head, which couldn't comprehend it, and out of her heart, which couldn't let it go.

"Why are we still friends?" Regina repeated abstractedly, "I often wonder myself. He was unfaithful, and broke promises both big and small. But, as contradictory and crazy as this sounds, I trusted him completely, and still do."

Det. Vega smiled. " Yeah. Well. Go figure. You can carve in stone a lie as well as the truth. Anyway, he was wrong about our not trying to help you. The problem in your case is we have no clues at all. That's why we hate these cases...they are so frustrating. They are slow,

time-consuming, costly, and at the end of it, no matter how much good work we do, all the leads can get cold, and all the dots may never be connected...the search can go on for years...."

"Years...oh, no, please..."

"But in your case, it's even harder. We have no bomb and no real reason to think we will ever have one. I'm not saying this can't escalate into the real thing. It can. But I wouldn't worry...in your case, if in fact a stranger is behind all this, it's probably just some thrill seeker.

Or someone who is merely insane."

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Insane.

Merely insane?

Or so Det.Vega had said. Nonchalantly.

If she shouldn't be afraid that an insane person was threatening to blow her up, what should she be afraid of?

Until she received her own death threats, Regina told Marius that she was most afraid of the failure of love and art.

Now Regina was afraid of everything.

The more beautiful the day, the worst the fear. You could not trust a beautiful day. Now, on any beautiful day, she was afraid that the ticking in her car was a bomb and not the motor cooling off; afraid of the half-empty water bottle abandoned by a jogger on the bank cash machine; afraid of grocery bags, crinkled, shiny, motionless, formed to a point like a soft ice cream cone and left on the locker room bench; afraid of the dark hallway to her loft; afraid to use her hair dryer; click on her TV; put lights on as she entered her apartment in case someone had gotten in and left the stove gas jets on.....

What did he want from her?!

Her old self trusted other people not to harm her.

"They wouldn't do that to me," she used to say. "They would know it was *me*."

But now she believed others saw her only as a meaningless blob in the familiar form humans take, and of

no particular consequence to anyone else, especially if she interfered in some way with whatever it was they wanted for themselves.

"I'm so expendable I should hardly care about myself anymore," she said out loud.

Like most people, Regina could tolerate fear once in awhile, but not this firestorm of panic on a regular basis.

Still, she knew that some people loved to be afraid.

"Nothing is more exciting than being terrified," they said.

Even if science showed that the brain could release pleasurable endorphins at times of great physical stress to deaden pain and alleviate fear, none of that happened to her.

But it must have worked for others. Even ordinary people clamored for ever-more terrifying rides at amusement parks. And not-so-ordinary folk---those whose own tamped-down brain arousal mechanisms needed extra pumping up--- engaged in ice climbing, cliff diving, free-fall jumping, hang gliding, waterfall hurling, white-water kayaking, radical skiing, sky surfing, deliberately setting off avalanches with snowmobiles, and a whole host of Extreme Sports that people say they do to "confront their own mortality."

As if they didn't have to confront it every day whether they set off avalanches or not.

Regina thought they could have saved themselves a lot of trouble by just knowing they lived in the wrong place. They could get it all here on an ordinary New York day.

On any given day, they might be able to look forward to being randomly shot while talking on a pay phone; pushed in front of a speeding subway train by a known psychotic who "just felt like it;" killed sitting near a restaurant window by the car that jumped through the pane glass; or getting electrocuted by a sewer cover. They could be gunned down by a co-worker; have their skulls shattered with a concrete block by strangers just for crossing the street in front of them; or they could be swallowed up by sink holes from collapsing sewers; be hit by a tour bus and dragged to death in the crowded theater district; crushed by a falling construction crane; find bleach in water bottles and Clorox in ice cubes; have manhole covers explode in their faces; crash in a helicopter; be a victim in a fast food restaurant massacre; get burned by an erupting steam pipe; have chemicals thrown in their eyes; die unnecessarily in a world class hospital; get terminally ill in a dirty diner; be in the way of a careening fire truck; drop at 18 miles an hour in a skyscraper elevator; find themselves hurled into the air by a bike messenger; be on a bus when the driver has a heart attack ; get caught in a gang hit; or be in a coffee shop when a disgruntled cook runs through swinging a meat cleaver. Buildings collapse, gas leaks demolish rows of houses, ferries crash, subways catch fire. Trucks carrying rocks turn over on bystanders, suicides land at their feet. Even the Mayor's car crashes. Highway off-ramps are not named for heroes but for those who have died violently on an ordinary day.

And in a city where there is hardly a tree, they could get a deadly tropical fever in a concrete jungle located in the temperate zone. Not to mention being directly in the path of a predicted mega-tsunami. So why are we not running for our lives, instead of frozen like a deer in headlights, Regina wondered.

“It’s New York. You live with it,” everyone says. Millions of New Yorkers went about their business every day as if none of this were going on.

Regina too was not afraid of any of these things, accepting them as easily as changes in the weather. On the other hand they didn’t arrive at her door with her name on them.

So she couldn’t understand why some people deliberately put themselves in the middle of dangers that were nearly suicidal. Apparently, it gave them an agitated love of life by facing death and coming out the other side. Never mind that their notion of being victorious and powerful was chiefly the result of luck and circumstances. Still, the Extreme Sports people would say: “It makes you feel alive!” Regina wondered how alive the many *dead* dare devils felt. The ones who died on the sides of mountains already littered with corpses. Did the spouses and children left behind have an agitated love of life?

They say they want life to be hard, a challenge. What is wrong with these people? she asked herself, brooding over her own fear, and seeing them with their empty heroics simply as grown-up brats with enough money to take their own lives and often the lives of others. Don't

they know how hard life already is? If they want life to be really hard, they could try fixing it: the poverty, pain, hunger, loneliness, crime, evil, prejudice, injustice, pollution, species extinction. Now there are the true challenges, if they really want them. They could try being police officers, firefighters, wildlife photographers, vulcanologists, researchers, surgeons, social workers, volunteers with the Red Cross. They could try being single working mothers. Or old.

In spurning the ordinary, the thrill seekers missed the point that everyday life is dangerous, that you have to be brave just to stay alive.

On the other hand, maybe it was not to feel more alive, but less. To put the unanswerable questions of life away as they concentrated only on the clarity of what was in front of them.

For that, they could just play golf.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

It was getting to him, prison life.

His **S.C.A.R.E.D.** project was one way he tried to cope. But right now it wasn't working. Ever since the cafeteria uprising, most of the small freedoms the inmates were granted had been taken away from them. Whether or not he had engaged in any part in the fight, like everyone else, he was now forced to spend too much time locked in his cell.

And, like everyone else, it was making him crazy. And restless. And angry.

He knew that wanting to smash his fists through the walls of his narrow cell was only because he couldn't punch some woman to get relief from his rage and inner poisons the way he used to. He remembered how they cowed and tried to cover their faces when he aimed for them. He could still see their frightened eyes through the fingers they had hoped would protect them

The memory gave him some comfort. He knew that the notes he sent from prison had some of the same affect....if not the hands to the face, at least the frightened eyes.

But he needed more.

His lust to harm overtook him. He was still on "**R.**"

CHAPTER THIRTY

Dear Regina,

You have had too much time.

I am tired of letting you live.

Love, God

It would be just a fast, hard, sudden slap.

With the strangling new prison rules, it would be almost impossible to get the note out. But he knew that as time went on and the prison remained calm, the rules would eventually ease.

He would wait.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

When she eventually received the note from Florida, there was no hiding from the debilitating concern she could see on her face every time she looked into the mirror.

She was exhausted from lack of sleep.

Det. Walker again tried to make her realize the threats were bogus. After all this time, there had been not one shred of hard evidence to suggest that anything would really happen to her. True, this note had escalated in tone, but his gut and experience told him it was still an empty rant.

Nonetheless, he was aware in a rare moment of empathy that this note was harming Regina without even touching her. He urged her to take a break to get a hold of herself and go somewhere she felt the threats were unlikely to follow her.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

"Doris," Regina said into the telephone, "I hope this isn't an imposition, but I'd like to invite myself up for a week....maybe two. If that's ok with you."

She was sure it would be. For years Doris and Uncle Roscoe had begged her to spend more time with them in the house on the Connecticut shore. She loved the house and in her own way she loved each of them.

Separately.

She just wasn't crazy about spending a lot of time with them together.

"I'd like to bring Drew. But he can only stay for the weekend," she added. Drew didn't particularly like either one of them, together or apart.

Actually, Regina would have preferred to bring her sister Nina, but Nina did not appreciate her uncle's over-solicitation about her comfort and well-being. While she knew it came from his good intentions, she found it annoying and patronizing, and in the end obstructive. Always trying to help her, he hindered her own successful operating systems.

"I am no longer in the mood for every fucking thing in the physical world fighting back at me," Nina told her sister, "including him."

But even she could not always find ways to be comfortably disabled. With a disability, every solution is its own problem; a million increments of compromise. That once you became disabled you interrupted some great basic ecological system of how humans operate in the physical world from the time their ancestors crawled out of the sea;

Locomotion in the ocean.

Sponges were the first and then the sea anemones.

Unhitching themselves from the coral reef.

Sucking the surface and pulling themselves forward, suck by suck.

Going to the food instead of sitting and waiting for it to float into their mouths.

Stealing space from their stationary neighbors,

Spreading mayhem and murder and power.

Walking!

Sometimes Nina was forced to ask for help. And each time, she felt scarred. One little scar on her soul after another, and another. A slash in her self-esteem, a nick here, a prick there. After a time her psyche was bloodied and exhausted. Just from others doing kind and necessary things for her.

Sometimes not so kind

"I don't work for you," one of her old boyfriends told her when she wanted him to lift packages without being asked. He pretended this attitude was about her survival. He said he tried to make his own life hard as possible to

prove to himself he could survive anything, and she should too. But it was difficult to make his life hard because he was the strongest, healthiest man Nina ever knew. The scariest thing he ever did, to prove he could survive anything, was never clean his filthy stove or defrost his rotting refrigerator.

So Nina preferred to carry things in her teeth rather than ask for help. When people helped her they had a tendency to treat her like furniture, taking control of the wheelchair like drill sergeants, never listening to the directions Nina gave them.

Good will created danger for Nina. Over-zealous wheelchair pushers refused to take her warnings about bumps and potholes and as a result have dropped Nina out of her chair into oncoming traffic. Once while she was holding a carefully boxed whipped cream birthday cake on her lap. The element of slapstick as the cake went flying through the air and landed upside down did not quite make up for cars screeching to a halt in front of Nina's surprised, but tumbled and humbled body, simply because when she said "Wait," the helpful friend wouldn't.

Even so, Nina was not totally at war with the able-bodied world. Nina worried about other people. She knew they had their fears too, their poverty, their sickness and their heartbreak. That they were the ones stuck on the subway. That they didn't create perfect lives for themselves. That their own behavior often brought a lifetime of losses.

She worried that what she needed might take away from what other people needed: was she blocking their way, taking their time, did her slowness slow them down, her limits limit them?

"I know how difficult it is to be with me, with all my restrictions imposed on those who don't have to have them."

She understood that no one would choose to be handicapped unless they wanted to park.

Even so, she admitted to Regina, "Listen, I'm not even as kind to other disabled people as the able-bodied are to me. No, I am not kind. I am not kind at all."

Nina didn't like to see other cripples. She found them odd and amazing.

Once, TV Channel surfing, Nina caught the Olympic games for the disabled and was thrilled at first to see their strength and athleticism--something she knew a lot about. But then all their pluckiness, and unnatural equipment, started to make her tired. She would have preferred to see the regular games where ordinary bodies beautifully displayed the miracle of their natural workings.

"I suppose that's the way other people often feel about me," she told Regina. "I'm sure there is cumulative exhaustion and discomfort. Eventually I get discounted. Their energy for coping with my difference wears out. My mere presence on a long-term basis must be very annoying to other people, when time and time again, each time they see me, they have to confront their feelings about me. Tolerance fatigue. They become eager to get

away to the relief of their simple freedoms, to the special pleasure of being with someone else who can just pick up and go, someone who doesn't turn every ordinary thing into a complicated problem. Ironically it is the same for me. I get crazy sometimes dealing with the slow, the hard of hearing, the confused, or anyone who likes to stop to eat all the time.

Believe me, if I were able-bodied I'd be insufferable."

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Regina was touched by Doris's enthusiasm for her visit. She knew living with Uncle Roscoe made her lonely.

When Roscoe called back a half hour later, excited, and checking out all sorts of lovely summer plans with her, she thought that this was turning out to be a very good idea. She wouldn't tell them about the bomb threats and she might paint a little, while she was there.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

i.

Regina packed too much stuff. That was the temptation when traveling by car. She took old clothes to paint in, as well as swimwear, casual summer clothes, dressier clothes, and colder weather clothes for both dress and casual. What was she thinking! Well, I might need them, and then what? In addition, she had a briefcase of paints, brushes, small rolled up canvasses, a light portable easel. And a tote bag of books.

When she approached her car she saw that a large delivery truck had double parked, blocking her in. In addition, the newly-parked car behind her had left only an inch between itself and her trunk, just as she had been forced to leave only an inch between the front of her car and the one ahead.

What was it a nervous out-of-town driver once shouted at her in heavy traffic?

"Back off, lady, you're only an inch away."

"In this city, buddy, an inch is all you get," she told him.

But now there was not enough room to stand in the street and directly load the trunk. She would have to try to unlock it by leaning over from the sidewalk, then contort her body to lift the bags in sideways. She couldn't even go around to the other side to distribute the luggage evenly, because the delivery truck was in the way. And if she did get everything in, she wouldn't be able to go anywhere until

the truck moved. Whenever that would be. She would have to stay there and wait it out because it was not wise to leave her bags in the unguarded car.

Well, at least the car behind her that the bags kept bumping into didn't have one of those shrieking alarms. And when the mammoth truck, with its urgent cargo of teeth-decaying soda finally moved, Regina was able to scramble into the driver's seat and shout at the dashboard: "GO!"

Regina talked to cars. Named them. Cried when her old car was gone. When she mistakenly spoke to the new car with an old car's name, she was terrified that the new car would conk out from jealousy. "Marius was right. I'm eccentric as hell," she thought.

She would do the driving until Drew took over out of the city. This worked well. Regina had nerves of steel in the city, but she was uneasy on the highway. Besides, she loved watching Drew drive. When the sun hit his muscular arms on the wheel, it excited her.

But first she had to find a gas station. This was one of the trickier jobs of driving in Manhattan. Considering how many cars there were, filling up was getting harder and harder. Drivers exchanged information about station locations like sharing secrets about where to find the best pizza. It didn't help, since gas stations were constantly being torn down to build large apartment buildings. It used to be that oil made millionaires. Now it was rent.

ii.

Regina found few things sadder than driving through America. It never ended, the ugliness of the highway--mile after mile. "The physical world I live in is not beautiful," Regina mentioned to Drew as she stared out the window. "You don't live here," Drew said.

"I don't just mean the highway. I mean New York too. I mean none of it is beautiful with nature. And it's so much effort to get to nature--look at this--we've been out of the city for over an hour--do you see anything you could rightfully call nature anywhere near here?"

Obviously her mood had not picked up. Getting away from the city was supposed to be a solution of sorts to stop being afraid for awhile. On the other hand, the combustible relationship between Roscoe and Doris was like a low rumbling volcano that never fully erupted. It just made you constantly aware the hillside was not entirely safe. It was a decision where desperation played a part.

"You're being so good to come with me," Regina told Drew.

"I'll never understand how that man puts up with her," Drew said about Roscoe and Doris. "What does he see in her?"

"I understand what," Regina said. She knew that Doris had been a woman so striking that when she passed, other women nervously checked themselves in the nearest mirror.

"Actually, I was crazy about sweet Uncle Roscoe when I was young."

Roscoe had always been in Regina's life. At first, his pleasant, non-assertive nature endeared him to everyone. But Regina eventually learned that a lot of what you saw in Roscoe was a mask. His true nature was underground.

"How come you've changed?"

"As I grew older, I realized that what seemed to be a dear guy who never made waves is just someone who is so non-committal that there is no commitment. You get no flack, but no support either. I soon felt cheated by his passivity. There you are, giving him your all and he's giving you nothing. And smiling."

"A self-effacer is a self-eraser," Drew dared pun.

It was hard to talk to someone who was punning.

But because they would soon be with him, Regina suddenly wanted to get her mostly unspoken feelings about her mother's younger brother out of her system. She so seldom got the chance, or took it, since she instinctively defended him to Doris, who never had any trouble making her feelings known.

"What really makes me crazy," Regina said, "is his never-ending carelessness with daily life. I mean what do you do with a guy who always gets out of your car and just walks away leaving the car door wide open, no matter how many times you have reminded him to close it. Or when you make plans to meet, he is always late. If you are supposed to meet at seven he calls at eight to say he'll be right there and shows up an hour later than that. Then he blindsides you with a change in plans mid-stream without

telling you. And you can never get a straight answer or complete information from Roscoe. He always told me: 'Once people know what you really think, they can hate you.'"

"He's right," Drew said. "When I was eight, one of my grade school teachers picked me as her favorite. I used to stay after class with her and clean the blackboards and talk. I felt so grown-up, so chosen. Then I made the mistake of telling her that I didn't want to sit next to another boy in the class because he stuttered. Her attitude changed toward me right then. I could see this from the look on her face. The sanctimonious bitch dumped me and picked someone else!"

"Well," Regina said, "you know you were wrong."

"I was eight."

They drove in silence for awhile.

"But you've got to admit," Drew pointed out, "it would be hard to say what you think to Doris. She must make his life miserable."

Regina shook her head in agreement, but then said: "I think Uncle Roscoe has learned the art of being craftily forlorn."

iii

Regina was pleased and surprised that Drew was telling her stories of his childhood, pleased to listen and learn. There was so much about him she still didn't know. And God knows, it was only relatively recently that, with her uncomfortable new awareness of past and present self, which seemed to jump out at her seemingly from nowhere, did Regina stop thinking that hers was the only story worth telling. *Her art, her loss, her fear.*

But she hoped Drew wouldn't become like Marius who had a need to tell his stories over and over. At first she was glad to hear them, believed they gave her insight into who he was, and put her firmly in the special role of the person who shared all of his life. But soon with their sameness they became a cliché of who he was. And she learned that Marius shared them with everyone, including strangers in restaurants. It was not a special connection with her, but just a fine-tuning of himself.

He used to say, supposedly joking, " Regina, we have to break up. You've heard all my stories."

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

i.

Drew, who like others of his generation, was uncomfortable unless there was a lot of noise that wasn't conversation, turned the car radio on. Regina hated this but knew it was necessary to make some concessions to him. She closed her eyes and tried to tune it out, by thinking about what she was about to get into.

ii.

One summer night several years ago, when Roscoe was at his weekly neighborhood card game, Doris and Regina sat on the screened-in porch of the Connecticut shore house, with its lawn sweeping down to the rocky wall that separated it from the slowly rolling waves of protected Long Island Sound.

"This is nice," Regina said.

The quiet swishing of the waves and a couple of glasses of wine put Doris into a soft confiding mood. "I'm not interested in 'nice,'" Doris said. "Not interested in nice people, not in nice towns. Never wanted to see Seattle, Atlanta, or anywhere in Virginia. I was probably wrong. But I did like Naples, Florida. Maybe because it looked rich."

Regina laughed.

"I'm not nice either," Doris added.

"Oh, of course you are!"

"Well I don't feel nice around your uncle."

"Really? Why not?"

"He's nice enough for both of us," Doris said caustically. "A real sweetheart."

Regina raised an eyebrow as she reached over for more wine. She was already a glass behind Doris.

"But beware of the emotionally insecure bearing gifts," Doris continued.

"We're all emotionally insecure."

"Ah. Well."

They were silent. A moist breeze barely stroked the hanging bells into faint clicking sounds and flying insects hit the screens like kittens clawing.

"Don't let your uncle fool you....."

"He doesn't"

"...people like your dear uncle tell you 'yes' when they mean 'no'--god forbid they should tell you something they're afraid you don't want to hear, like whether they prefer steak or lamb chops. They think that just because they are not able to ask you for what they want, you're the one at fault for not giving it to them. So they sabotage you ahead of time, the burrowing bastards."

Regina thought she should feel uncomfortable with Doris talking about her uncle like this. "Well, someone who basically says 'yes' to everything must be fairly easy to get along with," Regina tried in Roscoe's defense.

"Are you kidding? It's depressing," Doris continued. ".....he constantly complains that I'm controlling..."

"....Really?..." There was a slight tinge of amusement in Regina's voice.

"But just because he feels controlled, doesn't mean I'm doing it to him. The degree to which a person feels controlled by someone else is in direct proportion to how out of control that person is all by himself."

"Well, that's pretty much the whole world," Regina said.

"Look," Doris continued, "It's not like I'm pushing him down; I'm just filling in the vacuum he leaves. On the other hand, I see no advantage to losing control either. I'll take

as much of it as others insist I have. I'd rather have it than the alternative."

"Why do either of you have to have.....?"

"Whatever your uncle may make others think about me with that false innocence of his, he has his own way of getting his own way, He's the Imperialist in the closet."

"You must have seen this coming."

Early on Doris overestimated how much of a companion of the soul she actually had in Roscoe since he had a tendency to agree, or seem to agree, by silence. "I was taken in by his amiable, cooperative charm," she tried to explain to Regina.

"We all like that in a person," Regina replied.

"OK, I admit it. If you put brash personality like mine with someone who, before I even knew him, was a self-protector, there has got to be trouble. I scare him to death. But I don't do it to him. He brought his fear with him. He just uses me as a place to put it. Just because he is afraid of me doesn't mean I'm a frightening person. It only means he's a frightened person by nature. I'm weary from taking the rap just because he was born with scared genes. It's not that I intimidate him; it's that he intimidates himself. Hey, with these people, everybody who knows how to tie their own shoelaces is intimidating."

"Forgive me, "Regina said in her now caught up wine bravery, " And I say this only in the interest of improving the situation, but I have seen you"

Doris flinched. "You're right. I guess intimacy brings out the worst in me. Well, at least I only 'hurt the one I love'," she tried to joke.

Regina was annoyed. "I think over the years we have had this same conversation many times..."

"I know. I know. But it makes me so sad that the person closest to me, my theoretical best friend, the only man in my life, is foolish and unreliable. He makes me feel bad about my life: I expected other kinds of people in it. Sometimes I think keeping an old fool in your life tells you too much about yourself."

"Do you ever try to talk to him?"

"Talk to him! There are years of talking to him. But even if I try to change, try to talk to him about our problems, he still makes me the bad guy against him, with his big eyes and his 'sorry, sorry, sorry.' Then he goes underground and screws me royally first chance he gets. In the end, I don't have the power to change his deep commitment to himself to crap up his own life."

"That's him. What about you?"

"Regina, I want to do something about it. I do. But instead I seem to be stuck like a crazy person wandering the streets of my own mind constantly complaining about him to any imaginary person who will listen."

"Do we go left or right at this next turn?" Drew said.

"What?" Regina was startled.

"Quick! Left or right!"

"Left."

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

i.

Uncle Roscoe struggled into the kitchen with a heavy case of mineral water bottles. He carried the case with difficulty in both arms and put it down on the kitchen table with relief. Doris came in right behind him, carrying large bags of groceries in each arm. She tried to put them down on the table but the case of bottles took up all the space.

"You should not have brought that in first," Doris said to Roscoe, "If you had not brought that in first, we could have brought these in first, and then we would have had more room to put these away and then those away."

"What's the difference? We'll put them all away at the same time."

"It is metaphysically impossible to put them *all* away at the same time," Doris said, putting the grocery bags on the floor. "In our earthly time-space ratio, only one thing at a time can be put away. Not *all* at the same time. So therefore we are confronted with a choice of firsts. If you had not brought that carton in first--which you have--we could have put these grocery bags away first."

"Well, we can still put the groceries away first. So we'll put those away first."

"First," Doris pointed out to him, " to put groceries away first we first need to sort them on the table so we can put them in the right places in the cupboards and refrigerator. And we can't sort them on the table because that is on the

table. Now we have to put everything in that case away first and get it out of the way so that we can sort these grocery bags and put them away.”

Roscoe suddenly picked up the heavy case of bottles in both hands and with a grunt dropped it to the floor. He picked up the two grocery bags and placed them on top. The couple glared at each other for a moment before Doris quickly began to sort items from the grocery bags on the table.

"I hope you didn't break anything," she said.

Roscoe opened the refrigerator door and stood by ready to receive the food to be put away. He knew Doris always liked to do this in an assembly line process. He was neither angry nor defeated by the bickering with Doris. It was just routine.

Regina let the screen door slam on purpose to alert them that she was coming through.

"So, that's where you two were off to at the crack of dawn this morning," she said to them, "hunting and gathering."

From the moment Regina had arrived two days ago and entered the familiar large rustic, wood-beamed living room, cradled in light from the huge picture window that looked out on the rocky ledge and softly lapping water, she vowed to enjoy everything---and everyone.

"Hello, darling. Was the swim wonderful?" Doris said to her sweetly. Then added: "It wasn't the crack of dawn. It was 10 am. The middle of the afternoon for those of us who really love summer."

"Hi, sweetheart," Roscoe said, " We got the mineral water you wanted. It's right here. Want some? You must be thirsty. It's not cold, but I can put in some ice..."

"No, Roscoe, not now," Doris scolded him, "she can wait. Can't you, dear? It will only be a few minutes before we get all this away and then you can have the whole kitchen to yourself...in the meantime you'll have a chance to change out of that wet suit....."

"Of course. Don't *worry* about me," Regina told her, "....I'm just fine. Can I help? My god.....look at all those bottles...one large one would have been enough for me....you shouldn't go to all this trouble for me...I really..."

" Nothing is too much trouble for our little artist." Roscoe said. "What a thrill to have you doing your next work here. With us. And what a special treat for me to finally be with my favorite niece," Roscoe said, hugging Regina affectionately.

"Roscoe, leave her alone. She wants to work."

"No, that's alright," Regina told Roscoe, "I'm taking the day off. Drew will be leaving and I want to spend some time with him before...."

Doris cautioned, "But I do hope, dear, that he doesn't distract you too much. You don't want to waste this precious time. You know you'll only be mad at yourself again."

"Actually, I'm not quite ready to work. I'm still circling around that scary white thing inside... the canvass," she explained to their puzzled faces.

"I don't blame you," Roscoe said. "I could never do what you do. I could never put something private out for all those people to see. And having shows like you do...suppose they don't like what you've done! My god!"

"What's really difficult for me," Regina said, "is not what *they* think, but the difference between what I want to do and what I am able to do." She laughed at herself. "I'm always so unhappy with my work, it doesn't matter if other people are or not."

"Poor baby," Roscoe comforted.

"Poor baby, nothing," Doris said to Regina, "Talent is a gift."

"Gift? Funny. I always feel so burdened."

"Now that's what you're here for," Roscoe said, "No more burdens. You just rest. Swim and paint and don't worry about a thing. It's so great having you here. And I get to try out all my weird and strange concoctions on you!" He jokingly held up a box of Jell-O and a can of tuna fish.

"You make it, I'll eat it," Regina challenged.

"Ah, damn it!" Roscoe said suddenly, "I forgot to get those big broiling pans. The throw-away ones. Our metal one is a mess, and I'm tired of cleaning it. Doris, you didn't get them, did you? They were on the list."

"No. Not on my list. Sorry."

"Well, I'm going back to get some," Roscoe decided, "I want to get all this survival business over with so we can get down to the interesting excesses! Unless you don't want me to go out again?" he whined to Doris.

"Of course I want you to. Why wouldn't I want you to!"

Roscoe shrugged defensively for having annoyed her, picked up the car keys from the hook by the door and left.

ii

"I am no longer beautiful," she once said to Roscoe.

Doris could see it in her face: the door closing; slowly swinging shut, and like in a dream she was helpless to stop it. Certain things were now irretrievable, and they just would never happen to her again.

"So I guess I'll have to be nice instead. After all, now even my old lovers are old."

She was hoping for a laugh. Or at least, forgiveness.

Roscoe smiled, but did not reply. He was not in the mood for Doris' thrashing against the crushing inevitability of what faced them both. He often thought: When I was young, the life of the old was meaningless to me. Why does it take us by surprise, since we see it happen everywhere. When we were young we told ourselves we would refuse to be old, thought that the old were old because they didn't refuse, that they went like lambs to the slaughter, that growing old was an outside force they could defend themselves against and didn't. When, then, do we become surprised that we can't refuse.....?

Neither of them was able to refuse. This was one of the few things left to them in which they could find comfort and understanding in each other.

"I knew you when you had hair," Doris often told Roscoe.

He was glad to have someone else who carried his history within. He felt this expanded him, amplified him. Might help to reconstruct him. For so long, you think it's your

world then suddenly find you've been bumped into the wings and can't get back onstage.

Hope would heal them if they could retrieve it. But it was hopeless:

Teenagers die of loneliness before they find it; the old after they lose it.

iii

While they waited for Roscoe to return, Regina and Doris took their freshly poured mugs of hot coffee and drifted into the parlor with the big picture window.

"I love this room," Regina said.

"We all do."

After a few moments, Regina chose the old wooden rocking chair next to the window. Her bathing suit was now completely dry. Doris rested her coffee on a side table and went about leisurely straightening up the room from the activities of the evening before.

"You seem very unhappy," Doris said, "and I don't think it is just about Marius anymore. I *know* something is wrong."

Did Doris find out about the bomb threats? That was impossible. Did Drew tell her? He promised. No, Regina could see Doris didn't know, but she had picked up something else, something that had made itself known to Regina only now that she felt safe here, and the constant sense of danger no longer crowded out her entire being.

Even though Doris did not think Drew was an appropriate companion for Regina, she was concerned enough to ask: "Are things going well with Drew? I thought you both were....."

Regina became convinced from this question that Doris was still unaware of the crisis overshadowing her life. And

she wished to keep it that way. Why bring it here when she was here to get rid of it.

"Drew is ok, and I like him; but his being in my life doesn't hold when he's not around. There is nothing of him that he leaves that I can use when I'm alone. And that's important to me since I choose to be alone a lot."

Doris waited.

Then Regina added, "Not like it was with Marius." She could never stop talking about Marius with those who knew him. It was a way of conjuring him up to still be with her.

But then she said: "I'm not going to paint anymore."

Doris stopped in the middle of the room and looked at her.

"But you're all set up....Why would you not....?"

"That's the point. I came here so eager to try something new. New for me. Something in nature instead of the artificial light that so eludes me. I hoped for the platinum color of the sky. But even as I was getting ready, I knew I couldn't do it anymore."

"Of course you can do it! A tornado couldn't stop you...."

Not a tornado, but perhaps Regina's old habit of relentlessly picking at her own life could.

She was in one of those phases when she told herself that art was useless, that it doesn't feed anybody, doesn't take away pain, or make the world better; it couldn't pluck answers out of the universe.

Then she would argue with herself that it was good for the soul. And finally, she would slump under the realization that, regardless, she herself could not manage to produce anything that was good for either body or soul.

She felt the work she did fostered the joy of life for no one, while in order to do it, she had to kidnap herself in a place with no air, no light, and no color. She believed that if she didn't have the crucible of the painting life over her head, she could be a force in the world. But instead, she was paralyzed by her own selfish absorption, by her need to indulge in being dreamy, vague, detached, and alone; jealously and zealously keeping herself away from ordinary life so that she would, without excuses or harm to anyone else, be able to dash back to her beloved silky aloneness, an aloneness she savored like eating creamy vanilla pudding, an aloneness where she was careful not to get involved in doing things for people, or the world.

She wouldn't even get a dog.

And now, since she feared any minute she could be gone, she needed to rethink everything.

"What else could you be but an artist!" Doris said.

“I have no right to be an artist. What do I really know.....? All my life I’ve believed my reality was the only reality....not listening to the world when it was trying to tell me that I knew nothing....”

“So, you’re normal,” Doris pointed out.

“No. There are people who behave differently. Who do things that mean something. There has to be something better I can do with my time.....the world needs more social workers and fewer artists.....”

“Please...” Doris said, “Doing good for the world is pretty tricky.”

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

i.

It was true.

Regina had tried many times to help others and always seemed to get it wrong.

There was the old man in her building she inconveniently dragged to his doctor's appointment on the wrong day.

And the offer of her lunch to the homeless man trying to keep warm in a doorway with a sign: "Need money for food."

"How would you like my lunch?" Regina said.

"What do you have?" the man asked.

"A nice big roll with....."

"Does it have butter?"

"No, but....."

"Don't want it."

"Well, I also have some milk and some fruit..."

"No coffee? What kind of fruit?"

"An orange....."

"I don't like oranges. Do you have an apple?"

Regina left him a dollar.

Reading to the blind, she coughed, sneezed, wheezed, and apologized until they politely told her it was all right to stop. The offer of help to her confused neighbor, who rang her doorbell every ten minutes wanting more of what Regina had just given her, but which the poor woman couldn't remember; the big commitment she took on to mentor a troubled teen toward a career choice, who only

saw her as a free ticket to movies and junk food. The chaos, pettiness and inefficiency of volunteer work seemed to define Regina's efforts. In this regard, she was like one of those people who just can't grow plants, although, obviously many others can.

"Artists, in my view, " Doris said, "aren't here to do good works; they are here to get us past the bad. Bad work is mostly what kind of work there is in the world. And for all the people trapped in these lives, art is that part of life that still hopes. Besides, artists are very deficient as do-gooders.

Regina, honey, this is just a mood. We know you were meant to be a painter and not a social worker because you have painted a lot of paintings, and you have ideas for paintings, and experiments with paintings and more paintings waiting in the wings. It's so ironic that you are saying all this now. Other people have been trying to talk you into giving up being a painter for a more sensible course of activity for years....but you always go back to your real work."

"I no longer have the courage to be an artist." Regina felt she had become an all around life coward. No doubt some of it was because of the threats she could not share with Doris. Yet in spite of what she was telling Doris, and herself, she knew deep down that painting was her assigned task in the universe. But assigned by whom? By what? In any case, she was sick of living under whatever terrible tyrant was in charge of an assignment she never volunteered for. "Even I don't understand why, when I

paint, I am always in so much anguish over so little,” Regina said, “ why the useless effort makes me feel so abandoned by my inner self, as if I were falling off the edge of the earth into the arms of an enemy.”

“ I think it might help, if you would just stop thinking of art as a Holy Sacrament,” Marius once told her when she complained to him that she was tired of the war between her compulsion to do it and the realization that it was useless.

“ If I don’t do it,” Regina asked Doris, “ what would be the loss? Someone else surely has done it already, or will do it. Artists think that if they themselves don’t give the sacred message, whatever the hell that is, no one will get it. Well, my own mediocrity has stopped me in my tracks more than once. But now it’s for good. No more....”

“But you have too much talent to stop....”

“....and not enough to go on. There is absolutely no value to it. From now on, I just refuse to do it anymore.”

Suddenly, Doris heard Roscoe pull up in the car. "Well, here we go again," she said.

Roscoe burst into the room with the disposable broiling pans and a garish plastic Frisbee from a local gas station.

"Catch", he yelled, throwing the Frisbee at a startled Doris.

" Let's play!"

THE REAL PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

One Monday morning, early... maybe too early.... at the beginning of the world, God gathered together all the people he would someday create. He wanted to distribute to each of them a gift he had so proudly fashioned.

He called this gift: Talent.

But although God created Talent, he found it had a few strange problems.

Try as he might, he could not make Talent stay in one piece.

He pushed it and tied it and watered it and cut it down and sewed it back and stretched it and glued it and still Talent broke in two parts: 1) Desire. 2) Ability.

Now this was making things difficult. It would be hard enough to give one gift to every person that would ever be in the world, but two gifts to each person would be a big job, even for God.

For one thing, two gifts would take up twice as much space to store. And for another, it would take twice as much effort just to carry them: it would cost twice as much money, and it would take twice as long to give them out. Now time was not something God had a lot of, considering that contrary to popular belief he did not reside in heaven, but in a place a lot like New York City, which was why he was such a grouch and why it was important that he get

on with the job fast, using the least amount of space he could get away with.

How best to give out this gift of Talent soon became a major strategy issue for God.

Eventually it was the only problem he could think about. And as we know, if enough attention is given to a particular problem, a solution has a good chance of being found.

And so it was with God.

"I've got it!!" he said.

"I'll take these two pesky parts of Talent---1) Desire 2) Ability-- and grind each of them into a single magic dust that I will sprinkle over everyone at once. This will be very quick, it will only take up the space of a big bucket and it will save a lot of money."

So he did.

And mysteriously the two parts of Talent---1) Desire and 2)Ability—that had given even God so much trouble were ground together in big bucket of dust.

But even then, Desire and Ability did not exactly become one, because—lo and behold!—the Talent Dust turned out to be two different colors. Ability turned into a rich teal green and Desire was a shimmering magenta.

"How pretty," God thought.

Soon all the people who ever would be in the world were gathered in front of God, who stood on a ladder so he could see everyone, and also so he could throw the Talent Dust over all their heads.

"I'm going to throw Talent Dust over your heads-heads-heads," God announced into the squeaky microphone, "and to help me-me-me I've enlisted the services of my friends Breeze and Wind-wind-wind."

A great murmur of anticipation rose up from the crowd. "Here goes-goes-goes," God said into the microphone as he threw a handful of the teal and magenta Talent Dust over the heads of the crowd. Breeze and Wind did their jobs too, taking the dust a little way and far. God did this many times, each time saying into the microphone, "Here goes-goes-goes."

Soon it became apparent that the dust fell unevenly.

Some people got an equal combination of the teal and magenta dust, which gave them both Ability and Desire in equal proportions.

Some were standing under only the sprinkles of teal and got Ability, without Desire.

Some people were either too far away or too close and got no Talent Dust at all.

And a rather large group was covered only with magenta dust, leaving them with the undiluted Desire to create, but no Ability at all.

"There!" said God into the microphone, "we're finished----now go your way-way-way!"

God got off the ladder and went back to his neglected work of juggling the elusive formula for Happiness.

But from then on when people came into the world they brought with them the sprinkles of Talent Dust which had

or had not reached them when God threw it. But of course no one could see this right away.

And as time went on it became clear that the happiest people on earth were those who got no dust at all.

Or both the magenta and teal dust in equal amounts.

In the first case, those whom the dust missed completely had no Desire to do anything whatsoever that required Talent and so never needed any of the Ability they would never have. This spared them from a very unpleasant life.

In the second instance, those who had both Talent and Ability in equal measure did wonderful things for the world and we all still know of them to this day and they have made all our lives a little better, which is probably what God intended for everyone before he did such a bad job of getting that dust spread evenly around. Now when I say these people sprinkled with both the Ability and Desire parts of the Talent Dust were happy, I don't necessarily mean that you could know they were happy by looking at them.

Sometimes they seemed miserable.

Often the world treated them very badly because it did not always know they were doing good things for the world. And sometimes they might even doubt it themselves. But deep inside there was always a special little fire that never went out and always lit their way, however dimly, in their darkest times. And this fire was the cause of their strange happiness because it let them see why they were alive, when many other people couldn't figure it out even if they thought about it.

Now those who got sprinkled with only the teal Ability dust, but not the magenta of Desire, were not so bad off, either. It was a waste for the world, of course, that the Ability these people had would never be used for good, or beauty, or understanding. But they had no Desire for any of that. No skin off their noses, as they say.

But the poorest, unluckiest, most wretched creatures in the entire universe were surely those who had received only the magenta dust on their heads. They were stuck forever with the Desire to create but none of the Ability. They knew they Must Do, but were Unable To.

How unspeakably sad these people were. Their desire, their passion, their lust to forge something of value would often force them to spend lifetimes working, slaving, sacrificing. And yet each thing they created was ordinary.

These people all spent a great deal of energy on things that made no difference in the world. If they created something, it had no meaning. If they didn't create it, that had no meaning either.

Sometimes they would create something the world thought it loved, but would then immediately forget.

They knew all this meant there was something very wrong with their lives, but they couldn't figure out what. They thought if they just tried harder, it would all work out. They thought it was their fault. None of them seemed to know their fate had been sealed Before Time: that it was simply a toss of the Talent Dust that made them the way they were.

And no matter what they did, they always felt their own failure. They suffered from failure even if they found love. Even if they had children. Even if they made money. They suffered from failure even if they were happy.

None of the other people caught in the dust distribution system—and that was everybody else in the world—suffered for these reasons. It was only those with Burning Desire and No Talent that had paradox, and therefore pain, built into the very definition of who they were. In a world overflowing with the sad and unlucky, these people made up a tribe of unfortunates of their own particular kind. They were strange and annoying, even to themselves and each other.

One of the most annoying, and certainly unhappiest, person was Arthur. He had an especially acute sense of what talent was. When he saw it his body would shake and tears would fill his eyes. Fortunately for him, he didn't see it that often.

"That's it!" Arthur would say to his friend Morris, who had gotten No Dust At All.

"That's what I must do! See? It can be done! And I must do it!"

"Uh, huh," Morris would say. Morris never understood the choices Arthur made with his life. It seemed to Morris that Arthur was only interested in leaving space and waiting.

"I always have to stay ready," he told Morris.

"For what?" Morris would ask.

If Arthur and Morris were at a museum, Arthur would tell Morris "I can do that."

If they were at the theater, Arthur would tell Morris “ I can do that.”

If they were at a science fair, Arthur would tell Morris, “I can do that.”

If they were at a political rally and heard that even one person could change the world, Arthur would tell Morris, “ I can do that.”

Arthur never did any of these things. But he always stayed ready. “I was meant to lead a remarkable life,” he told Morris.

In that case, Morris wondered, why did Arthur do only unremarkable things?

But Arthur was so serious—actually somber, in fact --about all this, that no one, least of all his friend Morris, had the heart to tell him that he had obviously gotten only trace amounts of Ability dust mixed in with the unusually large portion of the Desire he was cursed with.

It seemed to everyone who knew him that the dust of Desire and No Ability was making a fool out of Arthur. Yet...it also made him heroic in a strange way. It's the brave who insist on going forward with lost dreams.

So Arthur, poor soul, kept on going.

He would do a little something and think he had a great gift, especially when compared to people who couldn't, or wouldn't, do anything. But deluding himself like this did not help. Because each time he tried to create some little thing, it would be the beginning of misery...of a nightmare in which he was trying to go somewhere and his destination kept moving further and further away, and the

more he urged himself “ a little more, a little more,” the more he would get heavier and heavier and pulled down, deeper and deeper, until he had to settle to stay where he was.

Then he would tell Morris, as he always told Morris, “ Oh, this didn’t turn out the way I wanted, but next time it will...” It never did.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

When Drew finally came down for breakfast--lunchtime for everyone else--the house was deliciously quiet. So quiet that he was startled when Regina called softly from the screened in porch.

"Good afternoon."

He found her looking cool, smooth, and provocatively bare.

"Where are they?" Drew asked cautiously.

As agreed, he would be leaving soon and Regina wasn't sure how she felt about this, although it seemed like a good idea when they first made their plans. She had not shared very much with Drew about the threats on her life since the first time he had encouraged her to dismiss them. He assumed she had and that there were no more. She never mentioned any in all the time that had gone by. His being free of this information gave Regina a much-needed clear, clean space to be. It wasn't about any of that when they were together. It was about the comfort and excitement of his young shoulders, the wide chest she could get lost in: it was about his sturdy long legs that moved stallion-like. It was about her face hurting with desire when she looked at him and he didn't know it.

"Doris took the boat out," she answered.

"And Roscoe?"

"He's probably watching from the dock."

"Yeah. No doubt she shoved off just as he was running for it."

"Now, Drew....stop it. Actually, Roscoe is terrified of the water."

"Then what are they doing in a place like this?...It's water, water, everywhere..."

"Doris is a fish. She'll do anything in it, on it, or for it."

"Sure gets her way, that lady," Drew said, as he headed out to the kitchen to get coffee.

Regina followed him. "Believe me," she said, "by now they both have it worked out to suit themselves."

"I don't think it suits Roscoe," Drew pointed out.

Regina was tired of this conversation.

So she told Drew: "It suits Roscoe most of all. He gets all the attention from everyone else. He purposely provokes her in front of other people, so she'll lash out at him---he can count on that; we can all count on that.....and then he becomes the poor kid everybody says "awwwwwwww" to, and brings him comic books and candy. That's the part he enjoys for fun. But in addition, he thrives on her know-it-all ways. He's glad someone speaks up for them; he certainly can't. And he often says 'When Doris stops fighting with you, you know she doesn't care about you anymore.'"

"Well, then it beats me what Doris gets out of all this."

"She's more trapped than he is." Regina was thinking of what Doris had told her , and of something she herself once read:

" We are bound to those who love us. In a certain way they exert their will after all. Even if we dislike them...hate them...we are still bound to them, because out of the whole world we can point them out.

We can say:'Them. They love us.'....."

Suddenly, the screen door on the porch slammed and Roscoe came into the kitchen in a kind of trance. He stood there in his bare feet as water dripped all over the floor from his soaking wet jeans. He lifted his arm straight out and pointed to the Sound. He tried to scream but nothing came out of his mouth.

Instead, they heard police sirens heading towards the water.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

i.

"Morning, hon. How're you today?" Uncle Roscoe asked Regina. He had come out to the porch from the door of the house. He looked very cheerful in his clean tan slacks and white summer shirt. He was obviously going somewhere because he kept checking for his keys and trying to subdue an air of jauntiness.

Regina did not turn to him. "Fine," she said.

"I'm glad we are both getting back to our lives." Roscoe said, pretending not to notice Regina's aloofness. He thought she had been excessively moody lately, but of course, under the circumstances he understood. "I could not have gone on these last ... weeks..... without you," he told her.

"I'm glad I could help," Regina said matter-of-factly, "After all, that's what relatives are for."

"Right." Roscoe paused a bit nervously. "Marius is coming up today to take you home?" he finally said. "It's great he could get away... nice to see you two are still friends...I always liked the two of you together."

Regina shot him a look. "Well, we try to spend a little time now and then, try hard to stay friends. There was a lot between us. So it's natural that some of it remains" She glared at Roscoe: "Don't you think?"

"Anyway, " he told her, " don't worry about your car....as soon as they fix it... ---and by the way you can rely on this

guy, he's a great mechanic. He'd make a small fortune in New York, but he hates the place. When he has it ready, I'll drive it down to the city for you....."

"I really appreciate that." Regina meant it.

Roscoe said, "You know, you could wait for it yourself. You don't have to go. I liked having you here. And I think you may have needed it too.."

"Thank you for letting me know I can stay."

Roscoe nodded his head and began awkwardly to leave. "Well. See you in the city" he said. "Say 'hello' to Marius for me. Tell him I'm sorry I couldn't"

"OK. I will"

"I miss loving you," Regina said aloud as she waited alone on the porch for Marius.

She found it hard that friendship was just another word for love that failed.

ii

Marius was nervous. Neither of them was sure how to act anymore. Being together was like old times, but it wasn't. They worried where the line was, how much emotional amnesia they should allow themselves, how much comfort they should enjoy without fear of paying for it later, once they were no longer captives in the cocoon of the car's front seat and their bubble of familiarity evaporated at the first parking spot. They worried that there might be a deadly silence. Or that their conversation would be full of mutual accusations, even if they didn't mean it to be, that he would say "our day is past," and she would think "Past!? It must have been the shortest day of the year. Just while I was trying to figure out how I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you, the damn day was gone." Worried that their desires, wishes, and regrets for each other would go to war with their friendly estrangement. "I've been thinking about the Erie Canal," Marius said. "Excuse me?"

"What an undertaking for its time: bringing the Atlantic Ocean crashing against the shores of the Midwest on the backs of mules. It bullied geography. It put Europe smack in the middle of the American land mass. Can you imagine it! And the work! Digging a dry river through hundreds of miles of land, and then filling it with water. For them it was like going to the moon. At the time it must have seemed like a glorious *permanent* solution to the intractable problem of sending and bringing people and goods right

where they were needed. In planning this thing, no one ever dreamed there would be such a thing as automobiles, never mind 18-wheelers whizzing down an interstate highway system with 40 foot containers of cargo, leaving the monumental achievement of the Canal to the tourists and....”

“Hm..mmm.”

Marius laughed. “Ok. I know when to quit.” He reached over and patted her hand in affectionate apology. “But just think of it,” he continued anyway,” All this highway we are on! Doesn’t it sometimes seem strange to you—unreal, I mean—to be in this little capsule of a car hurtling along some designated ribbon of concrete...”

“I drive in Manhattan,” Regina said, “ I don’t get a chance to hurtle.” She turned her attention out the window.

Marius cleared his throat. “I’m sorry I couldn’t have been there, sorry you had to be alone---for the funeral. And in the house....It must have been terrible.”

“I was with Roscoe.”

“It was generous of you to stay on with him for awhile. How's he doing?"

"Too good," Regina said.

"What do you mean....? You mean, he's covering his real feelings...?"

"I mean he's not covering! I mean, he's recovered!"

"Well.....good."

"Not good! No...I mean....I don't know...it just seemed so easy for him."

"I don't understand," Marius said.

"Well, you know.....I thought I should be the one to clear out Doris's things...I felt it...would be too hard on him, but, well....he wanted to do it, so I let him. I watched carefully to make sure it was ok....that he was ok....and he was. He was very efficient, in fact. When we got to all those little rocks she used to keep--the ones she would bring back from their trips and use as paperweights and such....well, he just started throwing them out. Didn't even stop to look at them...or sort them to see if maybe he could use...."

Marius stopped her, "Maybe he didn't want to remember"

"No. That wasn't it. He called them 'junk.' Said they all looked alike anyway so how could you tell where they came from. He said they had been a pain in the ass carrying them around in suitcases where ever they went..."

"Don't you think...maybe you're making too much out of Roscoe's not loving a bunch of rocks....?" Marius asked.

Regina felt helpless. "It's not the rocks....it's...yes, I miss Doris for my sake, but more than that, I miss her having her own life for herself: her own habits, pleasures, foibles....look, a woman dies and the little things she loved no longer mean anything. When a person is alive, all the things they hold dear are in three dimension. But when they die, these things seem to go flat, as if the life is taken out of them too. It is as though these too have had their day and their time is gone.

Her special things become special to no one. Not even her mate, who says, 'junk!'

And the job of loving herself in her own particular way through her own small things will not be taken on by anyone else.

Not even by those who loved her best, and well.

All gone. She's all gone."

Regina was shaken. "You know, I'm not even related to her and I think I'm grieving more for Doris's death than Roscoe is!!"

"No, I know you were fond of her, but I don't think so...."

Marius told her, "I think you are probably misunderstanding Roscoe. You know, when it doesn't hurt so much, you can afford the pain."

"But that's the point! He's not avoiding the pain. There isn't any. At least not much. He seems to be putting the fun back in *fun*-eral"

"Good god, Regina, what do you want! Do you want him to be dead too?!"

"No. No, I don't want him to be dead too. I just can't help noticing that people like Roscoe...the 'pleasant' ones....somehow we always think they are more devoted, more committed, more involved. They're not. They're just more afraid.

Oh. But he's not afraid now. No.

You should see him, tooling around town. Doing all the business Doris used to do. No more Mr. Nice Guy, with her as the Big Bully.

Now that she's not yelling at the plumber, he is.

Oh, yes.

And you know that little stand he always wanted to set up outside the house to sell those antique bottles he's got in the basement, well, he's enthusiastically planning to get that started now too.

You know what he dared to say to me the other day!? Granted, it was after a couple of glasses of wine. He said, " 'All this happiness is making me exhausted. My happiness muscle had become flabby, and now I find I'm having a little trouble keeping up.' He's happy! Can you imagine that...just weeks, and he's happy!"

"Maybe he's just in shock, or at the hysterical stage....." Marius said, "Sometimes before grief sets in there is a heightened sensation of life."

"No. That's not it. Why couldn't he have done those things...felt that way.. before she died. He's obviously capable of it."

"Maybe Doris wouldn't let him. She wasn't exactly an accommodating...."

"It wasn't her fault. Doris wanted Roscoe to do all those things. She wanted him to start that stand, but he always moved himself aside from ever taking action. I think he used to make it up in his own head the things she would, or would not, let him do. As it suited him."

"Well, now that she is dead, he isn't doing that anymore," Marius concluded.

"Exactly! And I resent it!"

"Regina, are you crazy?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I think it's a shame that someone has to die before another person will allow himself to reach his full potential. It's a kind of murder. It's a person's responsibility not to demand another's life so they can live their own!"

"Come off it, Regina. Roscoe has done no such thing."

"He has! Don't you see, she had to be dead before he would allow himself to be what he could be. Doris has been taking a bum rap all her life as Roscoe's oppressor, when actually it was he who never spoke up, who decided she could rule him; he was responsible for their hotbed of unhappiness.

Now in death he becomes a living testament to how much better off he is without her.

Well, he had a right to know he could have been better off WITH her too, if he had played straight with himself and didn't make her assume the responsibility for his not making his own choices.

It was easier to blame her in life for his failing and now it's easy to attribute his new-found 'self improvement' to her absence. This is an evil game...to barter someone's entire life for your small ounce of courage. When you could have had it anyway. He had an obligation to make himself happy while she was alive. Instead, he apparently needed her not to exist before he could do it.

I say it's murder....metaphysical murder!

God damn it!

I'm furious with him."

"I can see that. But you're talking as if he killed her," Marius said," Or even as though he feels he is better off without her in the world, which he obviously doesn't.

You're talking such utter nonsense I don't know what to say to you.

I think this bomb business must still have you under a terrible strain for you to have lost your perspective like this."

CHAPTER FORTY

i.

Yes, the strain from “this bomb business” was back.

True, Doris’s death hurt her, distracted her. But, if anything it left an empty space, not the lingering anxiety she now felt.

She would soon be home again.

And what would she find?

Suppose she opened an innocent piece of mail and this time a real bomb threw her body against the wall of her apartment, her blood splashed all over, as if an orange or a peach had been broken open and splattered. So what? she thought. After all, what were we anyway? Just other pieces of pulp and liquid, but with our skins still on.

My god, I'm still depressed , Regina thought as they approached a toll gate and Marius tried to search his pants pocket, caught impossibly snug under the seat belt, for exact change. And drive, dangerously, at the same time.

"Here, let me," she said.

Regina dug through her purse and didn't have much better luck, but at least she wasn't driving. She was still fumbling and counting out the dimes and nickels, giving them slowly to Marius one at a time as he threw each of them into the tollbooth basket. Their shoulders were unconsciously hunched for the expected blare of impatient horns behind them that surprisingly never came.

"How does either of us ever manage to get through a day" Marius asked, half-chiding the petty, unpreparedness that humbled everyone's daily lives.

"Actually, it's getting harder," Regina said.

Then she asked Marius: "Do you ever feel that we never learn?"

"What brought this on?"

"I don't know....maybe after a lifetime of not paying attention, I'm finally beginning to understand the importance of... history. Before, if it didn't happen to me or in front of me, it didn't happen."

"You can understand that," Marius said, "it's hard enough to grasp the present, never mind the past."

"Even so, I wish I hadn't been such a big discounter of other people and their stories.

I wish I had the sense and interest to get some history from those who lived it while they were alive. Now there is nobody left to tell me."

"Do you mean Doris...?"

"I mean now that I may be on my way out, I suddenly see where I came from and realize fully that it didn't all start with me. Why do human beings have such a long learning curve? What purpose does it serve that we hurt other people by not understanding or celebrating them."

"On your way out!? History....? What are you talking about?" Marius said, gently taking one hand off the wheel and reaching for hers. "You're overwhelmed by everything that's going on right now. Whatever happened to the

strong, sensible woman I used to know? You used to be such a fighter. Especially with me." He grinned.

"OH! MARIUS! LOOK! THE DOG....!"

They whizzed by the broken body and open eyes of a noble, long-nosed German Shepherd.

"Was it still alive?! Was it?" she implored Marius.

"I don't think so," he replied. "Besides, we were going too fast."

Regina understood that given their speed, and all the cars rushing behind them, they did not have the choice of stopping. This wasn't a country road.

"Suppose it were still alive! We could have saved it."

"And kill ourselves? What's more important?"

"They're important too!" Regina said, visibly upset, "It's wrong to think they are just some dumb animals...."

"I know, hon, Marius said. " I don't like to see them hurt either, but in this case...." He put his signal on and changed lanes to avoid the car tailgating too closely behind him. "Talk about dumb!....I would love to get a bumper sticker that said ' I Slow Down For Tailgaters,' but that would probably only make it worse.... no, I don't think animals are 'dumb'... and maybe being around humans has made them more intelligent...."

Regina guffawed.

"No, seriously," he continued, "it may be a kind of evolution. If a species can become more complex as it adapts to its environment, why can't animals, whose environment is human society, begin to think somewhat

the way humans do, as a result of reacting to the same stimuli.” Marius laughed at himself.

“Don’t laugh,” he said, “ but sometimes I wonder if –you know how ‘naturalists’ tranquilize animals in the wild, gather data, put tracking collars on them, and then let them go....well, I wonder if to the animals that’s the equivalent of an alien abduction, and the scientist’s jeep is the UFO. Can you just see it: the animals go back to their herd, or pack, or flock, and tell the others that these strange funny-looking creatures drugged them, examined them, implanted them with electrodes, and then released them.....

‘Uh,huh,’ the other animals say, and roll their eyes.....”

Regina did laugh.

“That’s better,” he said.

ii

Marius dropped her off but didn't come up for coffee. What did she expect? He had already been very generous with his time. Although she was emotionally disappointed that he left, on a practical level she did not think it would be good to have Marius back in her life. To have to go through his morning routine again: brush teeth, have a bowel movement, get in a fuck, shower, put on a clean shirt, dress distractedly, and rush off to work. Regina hated it, hated feeling like just one more of his regular bodily functions. But Regina knew she could have been more accommodating. Refusing him had become one of the many unspoken protests that hurt them. She only recognized this later. If she had understood it sooner, she might have been able to work something out. She always found out later that she could have worked something out. People work things out.

It was still early, yet she was tired. Too tired to unpack. While she was away, Drew had come by a couple of times to see that everything was all right in the loft and to bring up her mail. He had left a large pile of it on the dining room table.

Well, I'll just wake myself up with a cup of coffee, Regina thought, then slowly sort the mail. If I can face that chore first and all goes well, maybe I can get past the strain Marius noticed.

Regina put the hot coffee mug on the colorful Mediterranean tile table she loved, pulled over a small

bench to put her feet up on, and after a few sips actually felt ready and interested in tackling the mound of paper. To her surprise, it was beginning to feel good to be home again.

It was unlikely there were any real letters. Everybody called or emailed each other these days. She put all the catalogues, bills, magazines, and charitable solicitations, in separate piles.

She enjoyed looking through the catalogues at things she would never buy, to go with a fantasy life she would never have. She would do that first to escape the shock of the bills, and the woes of the world that required money. As she moved through the papers, she could see among the magazines a small, square envelope that looked like “real” mail.

“An early birthday card,” she announced to herself. She would get other cards next week for sure, but she liked to set the early ones up around the loft, like first birds heralding the countdown to the big day. Or small day, depending on the year, her mood, and life in general.

She tried to avoid birthday celebrations with Drew. She was always afraid he would be thinking: “You’re how old now? My god!”

No other plans were set for this birthday. Except that she and her twin sister would go somewhere, perhaps to dinner, for a modest double celebration. They did that whenever they could, trying to be together on their mutual birthdays since childhood.

Regina actually smiled when she remembered how, before the accident, she and Nina, had started a unique birthday ritual of their own.

Across the street from their house was an American Legion Hall which, because of its affordability in a blue collar neighborhood, was rented out for weddings almost every weekend. Out of curiosity, she and Nina were often drawn there by the music which could be heard on the street. As drunken guests exited and then reentered the wedding celebrations, it became clear to the two crafty little sisters that no one would stop them if they went in.

The first couple of times they were uncomfortable, standing out in their play clothes as they helped themselves to the soda and cold cuts and potato salad and danced with each other in the corner. Mostly no one paid any attention to them, although once or twice they got quizzical must-belong-to-the-other-side looks. They soon realized that they *loved* doing this: the decorated hall, the gooey cake and sweet soda. The festive music.

And it was all theirs, free and for the asking. They could just waltz right in. They decided that, although they did this as frequently as they could before their mother would surely stop them, at least once a year they would consider this their birthday party. They caught on that their confidence level would be higher if they got all dressed up like the rest of the guests. Soon, while their other friends were in old clothes playing in the street, Nina and Regina would get into their party dresses, including the patent leather shoes. Now there was absolutely no chance of

getting caught as pesky interlopers. In their dress-up clothes, the fishy looks stopped, they moved to the middle of the dance floor and even danced with the other guests. They danced hard and fast until they became wonderfully exhausted.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

It still amazed him that he could get the information he wanted.

Of course, nothing really amazed him anymore. But who would have thought that instead of just making license plates or doing prison laundry, well-behaved inmates also had technology jobs, processing the personal information of ordinary citizens across the country. For the government, no less.

And since he had access to the internet, at first he thought he would email the women. After all, he was on the computer almost every day. It would certainly solve the constant and dangerous cajoling of his fellow prisoners to put themselves at possible risk by taking the letters out for him.

But as “in-your-face” as email could be, it did not have the impact he wanted. An anonymous threat in the internet ether could be disconcerting, but in the end one could think, “Well, the machine knows I’m out here somewhere but maybe it won’t find out where.”

It had the same density of danger as an obscene phone call. After overcoming the initial fear, one could just sigh and hang up. He felt that old-fashioned hold-in-your-hand mail heightened the direct contact from person to person, as compared with machine to machine, and created a

much more sustained and frightening reality than any virtual reality could do.

By email, all she would know is that someone had found her cyberspace designation.

A letter, she would see, found her.

CHAPTER FORTY TWO

And though it was still too early, she couldn't resist. She opened the small envelope first.

She read the pretty computer-generated greeting that said:

***HAPPY BIRTHDAY, REGINA.
YOUR SPECIAL DAY WILL BE
MORE EXCITING THIS YEAR....***

I don't think I need any more excitement, she thought. Reluctantly, she opened the cover to read what was inside, when that gesture sent the ashes into the air and onto her lap.

Startled, she saw a burnt out match taped to a drawing of an exploding birthday cake above the words:

***ON YOUR BIRTHDAY,
A BLAST.....
AT LAST!
FROM YOUR SPECIAL FRIEND
LOVE, GOD.***

CHAPTER FORTY THREE

She recognized how tacky and amateurish this was. More like a “knock-knock” joke. She was familiar with the tone by now.

By now she felt the real threats were not in the messages themselves, but that he sent them at all, and in all the on-going, unanswered questions surrounding them.

How did he know? Who was he? What did he want from her? *Where* was he?”

He was everywhere so he could be anywhere.

“Corny,” or not.

“Nuts,” or not.

“Existential,” or not.

What did it mean “.....*AT LAST!?*”

When would it end?

She had hoped it was all over, it had been so long since any other note arrived. She had half succeeded in keeping her anxieties somewhat below the surface during her extended stay at the country house and all that had happened since.

But now, repetition and exhaustion made the hot flame of fear shoot up again.

Enough was enough. It was too much. There were too many.

This man, whatever else he was or was not, was clearly unstable. The danger obviously wasn’t going to stop, and there was obviously no one to help her. She

could not bring herself to turn to Marius again. She felt he had begun doling out his time with her in smaller and smaller increments, and she had just used up several of them at once. Besides, he had no way of providing protection any more than the police could.

It didn't surprise her that she had no instinct to pick up the phone to call Drew. The weekend Doris died, she hardly noticed Drew was there with her. He might as well have been furniture for all she let herself receive from him. In her mind, the big life events just weren't his area. Perhaps that was because he didn't make them be. He left the shore house before Doris's funeral. Regina noticed that.

Her first thought was to stop the threats by taking Marius' old advice and move to a new place with a new address unknown to the "bomber".

"Should I move?" she had asked Nina once before.

"To where?"

"Florida? Arizona?"

"If you don't get blown up, you could get bitten by a rattlesnake, drown in a pool, hacked to death by a crazy neighbor. Anywhere you go, you are subject to acts of god and mistakes of man. You can't make your life safe. You can make it dangerous, but you can't make it safe."

Even so, maybe she would move eventually. But what could she do now—right this minute when every window, every closet, every corner she couldn't see around seemed full of potential menace. Who could be there?

Her own home felt like the enemy. She was now psychologically homeless. She wanted to get away from

the house, but she might be more vulnerable outside. She was afraid to stay in; she was afraid to go out. Her feelings chased themselves around like a hamster on a treadmill. Regina never volunteered to be afraid—not at the movies or on an amusement park ride.

She thought she had learned enough about fear when she unthinkingly left a friend's toddler alone at an open window in a high rise apartment; or when showing her paintings to the public felt like an on-coming car crash; or when she realized the glider plane had no motor; or when her marriage died because no one loved her. Or, worse, because she loved no one, but had begun to cry for dogs in the news.

She used to be afraid of dying like this. Now she was afraid of living like this.

ii

During the day when the sun shines on us, it is easy to think we are the center of the universe. At night we cower with evidence from the stars that we are not.

So what if I die? I'm ridiculous. Not just cosmically ridiculous, but everyday ridiculous, ordinary ridiculous. Regina had a frequent fantasy of all life being nothing more than a blob of sap on a twig. Or a dew drop on a cobweb. And this miniature universe was made up solely of our own thoughts: our own thoughts making up, in exquisite detail, a world that contained everything that ever existed, every action or conversation, every event that ever happened, even every television commercial ever seen, everything that made up the landscape and portrait of our own lives and times, the world as each individual knew it, just sitting there like a piece of snot on a string. This personal universe had no other reality than our own thoughts. Why not? She didn't know what else there was. Maybe this was why Regina never wanted to empty herself of her own thoughts. They kept her company. She even hated to give them up to sleep.

When I'm dead, my thoughts will be gone; they are all the life there is of me.

Regina sighed. She wished she could take a vacation from her own personality. She was getting to be a pain in the neck to herself. I'm not in the mood for myself anymore, she thought. I think too much. I'm too serious. I'm not frivolous enough. I need to do more meaningless

things. I should embrace the randomness of peril like a mathematical probability. At least half of the time nothing happens.

What am I protecting? It's our own lives that are the enemy. No matter who we are, whether or not we'll be blown up by some crazed bomber, we are all galloping toward death anyway.

A bus crash. Boom.

An aneurysm. Boom.

An earthquake, avalanche, lightening.

Old age.

Boom, boom, boom.

Bomb.

Because death is unknown, life becomes the puzzle.

iii.

“What if, when we die, instead of the answers we think we are going to get, we just pass on to another level of misunderstanding?” one of her classmates had challenged the philosophy instructor.

“Well, Ms. Parker,” the instructor threw at her, “what about it?”

This was in the era when Regina knew everything.

“Do you think the universe did all its stuff just waiting for us to arrive in one millennium or another?” she answered.

“We didn’t exist before; we will not exist again. If a star can burn itself out into nothingness, why would we have a different fate. Made up of star dust, we go where stars go.”

“Of course, there is life after death,” Marius said when she once repeated this theory. “Why?”

“Because there has to be some purpose.”

“Why? What purpose?”

Marius hated these conversations. “Maybe there doesn’t have to be any more purpose,” Marius continued with his exasperation showing, “than just being part of the universal skin. We are the cells of the skin of some entity that is humanity and we get sloughed off and replaced.

And the whole skin is the important organ, not the cell.”

Regina held on. “Maybe. But a bunch of cells coming and going to serve some theoretical package wrapping still does not mean there is an afterlife.”

“You asked me ‘what purpose.’ That’s my version of ‘purpose’.” he declared testily.

“Believe me,” Regina changed her tone, “I really hope there is an afterlife for the sake of all the people miserable and unlucky in this one. I do wish for a higher power, someone to make my case to...you can’t talk to the natural order of things. It’s like an ethereal bureaucracy. There is no way to get its attention. In reality, you just have to watch indifferent nature run over you with a truck while you are alive, and abandon you when you are dead.”

Regina always thought she would die lonesome. She knew she would die alone. Well, maybe in the end there would be a few people the inconvenience of her funeral would annoy.

iv.

If I die now I'll never have what I'm entitled to, she thought. Maybe I should contact one of those charities which, if you have a terminal disease, they try to give you what you wish for—like baseball tickets or an oboe.

But we're all going to die, so why wasn't there an organization that gave you what you wished for all your life.

Probably because in some deep primitive recess we know death, being the inevitable order of things, isn't that important after all. She had heard it a million times on the news “....only one dead...”

A mere personal challenge.

She had always thought someday she'd get around to becoming an organ donor, so she wouldn't be entirely useless both in life and in death. But of course if she got blown up, she'd be in pieces, and that would do no one any good; she would be worthless even for the body farm where forensic scientists let you lie out in the field to test how your corpse bleeds, crumbles, decays, oozes, and sinks in on itself.

Hell, there wouldn't even be enough left of her to train the cadaver dogs.

A new kind of depression had set in.

CHAPTER FORTY FOUR

i.

Detective Walker waited for Drew at the counter. He knew Drew was furious but would come anyway. It was either come here or go to the station. Walker wanted to talk to Drew because he was the last person to handle Regina's mail, and this time the "birthday" threat was postmarked from New York City.

"Would I be so foolish!" Drew asked him over the phone. Maybe.

Walker knew you never knew, especially since it was he himself who had foolishly slipped the previous newspaper article, meant to seem like another threat from the unknown bomber, under Regina's loft door. That one time. Just that one time.

It was easy. In another common New York contradiction, even those who live with four locks on their own doors leave their building entrance open. He walked right in. If anyone questioned him, or if Regina caught him, well, he had a right to be there: he was on her case. He wondered why a woman like her would want to live in an old factory. Didn't they ever paint these walls? He started to climb the stairs; he had eyed the iffy, old freight elevator and decided that all the tenants probably took the stairs.

She wasn't home. In the dim hallway, he bent down and slipped the envelope out of his gloved hand under the large metal door. He never even questioned what he was doing. It was necessary. It became necessary when it

seemed the real notes had stopped and he was possessed to find, or make, a reason to stay in contact with Nina. She was now entirely uncooperative with him and had shut him out since their little ride together, referring all questions about Regina to Regina. There was nothing he could do about this, except maybe take the drastic step of forcing a subpoena on her, but he knew that would make everything worse. And he didn't have grounds. He needed a reason she could not turn away from.

If it weren't for Nina, Walker would have given up Regina's case altogether, and not even allowed Angela to spend time on it anymore. But his perverse attraction to Nina kept them both on the job.

And who knows, maybe Drew did send this latest note. Or maybe he sent all of them. Or none of them. Walker wanted a booth so he and Drew could talk but they were all filled. He hoped one would open up before Drew got there. The counter was too noisy.

"Just coffee, lots of milk, no sugar," Walker said.

The waitress gave him a New York "are-you-nuts-'just-coffee'-in-this-madhouse-give-your-seat-to-a-paying/tipping-customer" stare.

"I'm waiting for someone," Walker said with authority.

"Put in your own milk," she said.

Actually Walker was crazy about eating at coffee-shop counters during the lunch rush in busy areas of Manhattan. "If you ever want to see what real work is," he once told his wife, "you've just got to watch a short-order

cook and the counter person during lunch hour. It rivals air traffic control. The police could solve every crime in the city if they had half that intensity and coordination..."

"I like restaurants with tablecloths," his wife said.

Walker continued, "It's a dance, a ballet. They have the timing of a goddamn symphony orchestra. It's jazz, syncopation, and a Wagnerian opera, all leading to a rousing crescendo...."

"What are you blabbering about. It's just lunch." his wife said.

Just lunch..! He was sorry she had never seen the beauty of it all.

"Well, detective," Drew said, appearing at the counter, "What do you want?"

Walker noticed three young women had received their bill and he knew their booth would soon be empty. He'd flash his shield for it, if he had to. "Let's go over there," he told Drew.

They stood by the table while the bus boy cleaned it up and then they sat down. No one protested.

"What do you want, boys," a short, agitated woman in very white shoes asked, as she threw two laminated eight-page menus down on the table and one skimpy paper napkin each, and some warm knives, forks, and spoons that had just come out of the hot dishwasher and were still wet.

"How would we know," Walker said, picking up the thick over-elaborate menu and waving it pointedly.

"I'll be back," she said, and rushed off without being offended.

"What do you want from me?" Drew asked Walker again." You know I didn't send that card to Regina, so what do you want?" By now Drew had been told about all the threats. When he heard the extent of them, he felt cheated, left out. It became clear to him that his role in Regina's life was not that important to her. It confirmed what he had already perceived as Regina's growing distance from him. Which actually suited him fine..

Walker did not like Drew. He was too young, too good-looking, and too much of what all that brings out in a person.

"How do I know you didn't send it?" Walker said.

Did Regina tell Walker she wanted to break it off? Is this why Walker, in his mind, might think this was a motive for Drew and was focusing on him now? Drew had no way of knowing that although Regina no longer cared for him, in her fear, she wanted him to stay.

Anyway, it was Drew who was tired of Regina—her gloominess, this whole stupid mess that never seemed to end. And also because he had enough time with her. After all, where were they going; it wasn't going to last forever. He never intended to close his options, put himself in a box, a cage. He was not someone who wanted to have the whole picture of his life before him. But of course now he had to defend the relationship or Walker would truly see him as a suspect.

Drew just shook his head in disgust and didn't answer.

"Why would I?" Drew finally said. "Why would I possibly want to? It's not logical."

“ Well, I’m becoming less logical,” Walker said, “Hell, it’s fruitless being the only logical person in an illogical world. So, I’m thinking: maybe you’re one of those normal nuts. There are plenty of those.”

Drew said. "You're a pretty weird cop, if you ask me. First you tell poor Regina, who's scared half to death and is wondering if she is sane herself, that there is no bomb, that there is no threat, that she's not in danger. Then you suspect she is doing it to herself. And the next thing you know, you're accusing me--me!--the last person in the world to do anything to Regina!"

The waitress pushed her round stomach into the straight edge of the table to take their order, which they gave without ever having looked at the menus.

"I think you're doing something to Regina, alright," Walker said, " but I'm not sure what it is. What are you...half her age? What is she....paying you? And now she's stopped, and you're mad....What?...you thought she could help you with your career....what is your career anyway?...and now she won't....What is it, is she a cover because you're gay and she's going to tell....what....? No, I wouldn't do that," Walker said as he grabbed Drew's wrist. " No, that's worse than sending the card. Look, I could make just that one move very bad for you, but I'm giving you a break here. Talk to me."

Rage made Drew unable to talk, even if he wanted to. Although Walker and Drew had kept their voices down, people started to look around apprehensively, not sure who these two men were or what they were going to do.

But everyone relaxed when the waitress brought their order and Drew and Walker seemed to back off each other. Drew bit into his phony turkey sandwich and chewed furiously, silently. Walker sipped his watery tomato rice soup with low, evenly spaced liquid sounds.

Finally Drew sighed, realizing that between them it wasn't he who had the power. "Ok, I'm sorry. But I'm tired of everyone suspecting me of every bad thing under the sun because of the difference between my age and Regina's. If I were an older man with a much younger woman you wouldn't be making such a big deal"

"No," Walker said, "I'd be questioning the woman. Listen, for centuries older men with younger women have been the butt of jokes, and the women suspected of anything but love. People hate things that are different. They were made that way. Nature is a jerk, you know. It only cares that the woman is young enough to drop one of her species, and that the man is strong enough to kill something to feed it, so that the little creature can grow up and repeat the endless, and meaningless---to nature at least--cycle. Nature doesn't give two hoots about who likes whom. And even when people use their brains about this, even when none of it makes sense

any more, that old primitive arithmetic is hovering around in the air like the damp of a primeval forest.....so don't blame me...."

"Well, it's a shame..." Drew said. He chewed some more. "This whole thing is a shame. And I have to tell you that it

has really changed Regina. She is now totally obsessed with death."

"Death is a valid human concern," Walker shrugged.

Walker knew Drew didn't send Regina the threats. He wasn't nervous enough.

"Let me ask you," Walker said, too chummily, "could it be her sister?"

"You mean Nina!? Don't be silly. You know how close they are."

"No, I don't," he lied.

"Come on. They finish each other's sentences and laugh at each other's jokes".

"Doesn't matter."

Walker pictured Nina laughing. He did not like the fact that Drew had the opportunity to be on such friendly terms with her. Because of her sister, he probably spent a fair amount of time with Nina, which provoked a jealous pang.

"Are you sure she's so innocent?" Walker said. He wanted to talk negatively about Nina so he wouldn't continue to want her in his life. He always wanted to take her down, take away her power over him.

"Maybe she's trying to blow her sister up.....not kill her, maim her..... so she'll be just like her.....Now there's a motive for you."

"I so much don't believe what I'm hearing that I know even you don't believe what you're saying," Drew responded.

"Well, I'll have to investigate her again anyway." Surprising himself, Walker had just laid the groundwork to get back to Nina.

And she wouldn't have a choice.

Walker didn't really know Nina, so it puzzled him as to why he, who got involved, but always loosely and pragmatically, with women, became so suddenly and all-consumingly obsessed with her, to the point where he had become foolish, forgetting all his professionalism, leaving false notes for her sister, and falsely accusing everyone else.

And now her.

Nina knew. She had seen it before and she didn't like it at all. At first she noticed the well-dressed man outside so often as she left her office, she thought he worked in the building. Sometimes he would just walk past and glance at her. Other times he would wait nervously near the curb, ordinary behavior for a New Yorker looking for a taxi or to cross the street. Soon he would stand a few feet from her, against the wall, and smile as she came by. It started to occur to her that he was around more often—lunchtime, quitting time—and paying more attention to her than the mutual awareness of people who are frequently thrown together by innocently sharing one location in a big city.

One day as she waited in the sunshine for a co-worker, he tried to talk to her, but he was so upset she thought he would be sick. "Jeez, this guy is so freaked out. What's his problem....." she muttered to her friend as they left for lunch.

Nina did not want him to talk to her, upset or otherwise. It wasn't that she was afraid of him. Her decidedly dismissive manner usually sent men scurrying away.

The next time she saw him, he was carrying a camera. He started to walk behind her.

"What do you want!" Nina said as she suddenly stopped in front of him.

He seemed prepared for this. "Ah....look...I know you see me....watching you...But I can explain! I'm...a photographer...and I think you would make a great model....."

"A what?"

"....a model...I can see it in the photos..."

He fished in his camera bag for a large manila envelope.

"....what photos.....?"

"These." He said proudly, and more securely.

"You've been photographing me!??!" Nina hissed before he got the pictures fully out of the bag. Her jaw was tight, her breath was frozen. "When? Where? Why?"

"I followed you a few places...you didn't see me...it was ok...photographers do that all the time, and here, look, they turned out great." He was relaxed now. He handed her the photos.

Nina did not know what to expect, but automatically imagined the typical cliché "model" photos: face in profile with interesting light, casual laughter, a head turned in sidelong glance.

Instead, they were long shots of the way she walked, and cropped shots of the braces and crutches she walked with.

There was one photo at the nearby Public Library, as she struggled up the long flight of steps with all her distorted movements—the unbendable legs with the ass sticking out, the bulging arm muscles lifting her full body weight—clearly captured.

She knew that a “Devotee” is what they called someone like him.

I don’t deserve this, Nina thought, my life is bigger than this. “I am more than this!!!” she screamed at him, as she ripped the photos in half. He was truly startled by her fierceness. “Don’t you ever follow me again or I’ll have you arrested!”

He looked crestfallen. She was lucky. He could have been violent. She never saw him after that, although he could have been there. He could have stalked her, harassed her, been dangerous.

Walker could be dangerous. His was a fraternity of violence. Instinctively, she had rightly pegged him early as fitting into this same fringe category. He could not have known he was revealing his Devotee tendencies in their little car escapade or when he sent her the misshapen coffee mug inscribed: “Nobody’s perfeck.” He had sent it along with an apology for his behavior.

But Walker hadn’t figured himself out yet. He wasn’t exactly your typical Devotee.

Sure, he had some of the signs, but not the history.

Until Nina.

iii.

Anybody, or any thing, can be somebody's fantasy.

For Devotees the attraction is the disability itself, not the person. It's love on the perceived edges of society, the thrill of the unusual, the exotic, the foreign. The control.

Most of the Devotee profile fit Walker: professional, married, high intelligence, over-achiever, low in social interest, emotional stability and personal relations. Always wanting an encounter to be less threatening, with the other person more easily dominated, a touch of sadism and bondage, a captive audience without much chance of getting away. Walker was comfortable with these echoes of the typical interrogation room. So it never occurred to him that these feelings were out of line with his obsession for Nina.

Of course, one major difference that threw him off course was his wish to take care of Nina, as he also wished, under all that control, someone would take care of him. But there was also another difference. Why this obsession now, when it had never occurred before in his life?

It was Nina: the antagonism, the lively contentiousness, the love impulse in men set off by the possibility of conquering conflict, of a victory made sweeter by triumph in the face of resistance, the two emotions of elation and fright. The job description of a law enforcement officer.

But the unbearable erotic combination for Walker was that Nina seemed both helpless and unconquerable. Yet, in spite of her attitude, he still had hopes for them. He knew

Nina wanted nothing to do with him now, but even real love is often tainted with dislike.

He believed she would see that their constant friction was a form of intimacy in itself.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

i.

My poor sister, Nina thought, if this guy is still on her case. "Did you know Detective Walker called me again?" Nina asked Regina. "He's coming over because he said he thinks he may have a 'new idea.' What's he doing...? I didn't think he was still working on your case...."

" Since, apparently as far as the police are concerned, I don't have a case, I have no idea what he's doing.....!"

Regina said hysterically into the phone. "I don't know what any of them are doing. I thought it was Detective Vega--that weird Angela woman--who was doing the real work on the investigation, but maybe not. She just comes and takes some information as though I were merely reporting a stolen TV, instead of multiple threats to my life!! Actually I don't think anyone is really 'on' my case. All they do is wander around and tell me not to worry.

But neither one of them seems to be able to put a stop to this craziness."

Regina did not add that for some strange and unknown reason, Angela was occasionally able to put a stop to her fear. Maybe she just wore it out with her incessant talking. Regina had this image of her fear drowning in a sea of Angela's words and not being able to come up for air.

"Well, I really don't want to see Det. Walker again," Nina told her, " but for your sake I feel--*if* there is something new--I don't have a choice."

Nina did not tell Regina why she was uncomfortable with Walker. She thought there was as much chance that it

could be just another excuse for him to bother her, as well as to be a real breakthrough. But maybe it would be all right now. Walker sounded very matter-of-fact this time, even abrupt.

ii

"You know what I think? I think you're the one threatening your sister," Walker swept into Nina's apartment. He didn't sit down. "And even if you started this game as just a way of teasing or punishing her for some reason, I believe it has grown into more than that. Possibly you are a real threat to her life."

Walker didn't believe a word he was saying. But he thought it would put Nina so off guard that she would be grateful to him for anything less than such an accusation.

"You don't believe a word you are saying," Nina told him. "What do you want from me now?"

Walker wasn't pleased. He couldn't get Nina upset. But he would try another approach.

"You want to hurt your sister because she can do anything you want to and can't. You are full of envy and resentment."

This was all beginning to sound hollow even to Walker. He had to rescue it before Nina's obvious disbelief turned to disgust and she threw him out again.

"The last threat was a birthday card. To me, that's proof the threats came from someone who knows her very well. I've ruled out everyone else. Except you."

Nina thought this sounded like bad movie dialogue. It brought her irony back.

"Well, then I guess you must be right, detective. Arrest me."

He thought about it. Or rather thought about pretending to arrest her, putting on the cuffs, pushing her chair to wherever he wanted her for however long he wanted. Then what? He may have been strange, but he wasn't crazy.

Eventually, it would make a fool out of him and they both would see it.

iii

Nina laughed out loud when Walker left.

"What a jerk! "

She had made him feel like one too. He knew he had gone too far. Whatever his obsession for Nina might be, he had an even stronger dislike of being seen as an idiot, as he always seemed to feel around Nina. It was too much this time. His recent emotions for her lost the battle to his long-time overbearing pride. He would have to give up and be finished with it all.

But Walker had worried her. Not for herself. For Regina. The more threats Regina got, the more they did come closer to home. At first they were impersonal, coming from all over the country. But by now her sister had received one under her apartment door, which indicated the would-be bomber might be in this very city, and another which showed he even knew her birthday. That was too close. Sure, some disembodied insurance

company's computer might also know, but as a rule not even all your friends and relatives can remember your birthday.

iv.

One relative knew. Nina didn't mention Roscoe to Walker, because of the recent quarrel between their uncle and Regina.

Both she and Regina agreed it was spooky how much he had changed since Aunt Doris was gone. But Nina also dismissed any fleeting, vague, grabbing-at-straws suspicion of Roscoe because the threats had been coming long before Doris died.

And Nina knew Roscoe would never really hurt Regina. He didn't have the heart for it. With his aggressive incompetence, giddy ineptitude, and view that not good enough was good enough for him, he was almost useless. She always saw him as someone whose general operating procedure for life was to push the elevator button up to go down and the down button when he wanted to go up.

"Well, at least he is good-natured about it," Regina once remarked.

"Since he can't do anything right, he'd better be good-natured," Nina had replied.

Like Regina, Nina remembered that Doris found doing any ordinary thing with him unbearably difficult. It was hard to enjoy even the simple pleasures: taking a walk, joining friends for dinner, attending a concert. Among other things, he had no follow-through. Usually, he would charge forward enthusiastically with un-thought out plans and then let whatever had been concocted in the bright

moment fall by the wayside. His life was like perpetually rushed knitting where stitches were missed and dropped, leaving after all the effort, a ragged garment.

So, if Roscoe were now the one threatening Regina, it would be ok.

Nina knew he would never have the ability to pull it off.

CHAPTER FORTY SIX

i.

"You're glad she's dead," Regina accused him.

"Well, no," Roscoe answered, "But it turns out I'm happier without her."

"You could have been happier 'without her' while she was still alive. She didn't need to die for you to be happy."

"She didn't need to die at all. She just did."

"Well, apparently for you to be happy, she did need to."

"The next thing you know you'll be accusing me of killing her. Regina, what is wrong with you!"

Nothing was the way it used to be. Regina found herself lost in a maze of fear and unwelcome changes. This innocuous, always pliable uncle, whom she thought she had pegged for better or for worse, on whom she could count, as before, for affection, compassion and attention, had become totally different. She didn't recognize him anymore and wanted to strike out at him for that.

She regretted her former justification of this uncle to Doris, who revealed he had "whined for sex", and who now suddenly had become a ladies' man, a traveler, a party-giver, a heart breaker. A tyrant.

"Lucky you got all the insurance money," Regina said.

"Is that what this is all about? By god, I'm entitled to it, and I more than earned it in my roll of hen-pecked husband all those years."

"Well, why were you 'hen-pecked'....apparently you didn't *have* to be!"

" You saw that Doris only loved you so she could punish you . She believed it was not only her right, but her duty to tell people how awful they were."

"Never mind what Doris was," Regina answered Roscoe. "What were you?"

".....I beg your pardon.....?"

" I hear you want to take your new girlfriend on a cruise. You, who would never go near the water even though Doris loved it, a cruise! Where is your loyalty!?"

"My new loyalty is to those who treat me right and only for as long as they treat me right.

It's my turn now. No one is taking control of me anymore."

"No one ever took it: you gave it up. It wasn't Doris. You would have been oppressed with anyone. It's who you are."

Regina felt half-bad giving her uncle such a hard time. She had enjoyed their earlier days, when he would occasionally meet her in the city for a coffee break, making it his reward for a good sales day. Actually, they were all good sales days, according to him, as long as he could spend time with the fabrics, the textiles, as long as he could hold the nap between his fingers and feel its give, its smoothness, how it insisted on moving in its own direction,

the perfection in the weaving, the stimulation of the never-ending colors.

With the smell of mocha and pastries surrounding them, she would ask him, and he would tell her, stories about their mutual family life, about the forces which had shaped them both.

One day her told her, “You were too young to know my mother. Maybe just as well, before she started messing with you too. To give you an idea of what I am talking about, and not think me a terrible son, your grandmother Sylvia would wait until I came home from school to stick her head in the oven and pretend to kill herself just to show me how miserable her life was. And, of course, since I was part of that life, she expected me to fix it by meeting her outlandish expectations to become rich and famous, so scammed was she by our culture on what was important and possible in America. And if she didn’t have her head in the oven, she had the radio on, listening to country and western songs of loss and failure, crying over her life, which disappointed her as if it were some shabby thing she inherited and not something she had to make for herself.

And the blabbering, the constant blabbering, the rattling on and on:

‘ I bought this new shirt for you, do you like it, let’s see if it’s the right size, is it too big, it’s too big, I’ll take it back, should I get it in white instead of blue, it’s not too big, you’ll grow into it, is it too big, blue is a good color on you, white gets dirty, should I get it smaller in white, I’ll change it after

work, I hate that place, that bitch took the phone book off my table, said she didn't but I know she did, they laugh at me behind my back, they accuse me of being too slow for the work, I'm not slower than them, they're the slow ones, the lazy ones, my phone book was where I needed it, but they took it because they're lazy, that's why, I'm not slow, the work is hard and they make all the money because they can make the calls faster with the phone book they said belonged to the whole office, but they took it from me, I can get the shirt in a smaller size in white or should it be smaller in blue, if it's big like this don't wear it now, you can grow into it, if your father were still alive those lazy bitches wouldn't call me slow and take my phone book so I wouldn't have to get up and down, you know how my legs hurt, how sick I am and how no one helps me and Me?! Talk?! Are you crazy?! I'm not talking! I never talk, I'm quiet as a mouse, do I ever talk, no, you never hear anything from me, not a peep, what do you mean: stop talking?! You! Who do you think you are! I never talk. You couldn't have a quieter mother.....'

Ah, my dear Regina, there were times I couldn't get air, needed air, felt a thick membrane, a rubber mask cover my nose, my mouth. It was like being buried alive."

Regina wondered why her own mother never told her any of these things. When Regina would ask, all she would say was "Yes, I used to feel as Roscoe does when we were both children. Roscoe obviously never grew out of it, but long ago I realized that our mother was simply an inept, frightened---*befuddled*---immigrant widow with so

much sorrow. I couldn't really appreciate this until I became an adult myself and she was dead. Even now I want to thank her for so many things that then I just took from her with disdain and no understanding. She tried so hard--under such bad conditions--and I..we... must have hurt her terribly. She probably died with her only knowledge of her daughter as someone she wanted to connect with very much but who was rude and indifferent to her. I've learned since then, Regina, there is no punishment in life worse than your own regret."

That was then, but now, although her old blood ties to her uncle struggled to be kind to him in the wake of Doris' death , her disappointment in him overshadowed everything.

"Who are you? I don't even know you anymore!" she said.

"Listen, the one thing I know first hand from Doris's death is that it all went too fast and that it is going to be over, cosmically speaking, for the whole species in about twenty minutes. And the last good thing that happened to me took place thirty years ago. In the next thirty years, just sixty celestial seconds from now...I won't even be here.

When people utter the cliché 'Life is short,' you hear it and think it means everybody else's life.

But even now the world is casually gearing up for events that are planned to take place in the not too distant future when it's clear I'm not going to be on the planet anymore: flights to Mars, the next meteor shower, maybe even the next summer Olympics. It used to be that I would hear of these things and just automatically assume they would be

part of my everyday life. They *will* be part of everyday life. Maybe just not mine. It's shocking proof to me that even though I won't be here, the world plans to just flow on. My whole life will have been the sum of an unnecessary past, and then I'll be snapped off and fall away with a great inconsequentiality.

So I'm just not capable any longer of giving even two minutes more to anybody else's bullshit."

"What about your own bullshit."

"I do the best I can, until I can't. What personal crap I haven't been able to get rid of by now, I just have to make my peace with. Besides, if everyone else is so right, then why is everything so wrong. Anyway, Doris loved to tell me, 'Take it from me; enjoy it while you can.' So do you think she would deny me happiness now? Hey, somebody around here ought to carry the banner for happiness"

He held his tongue just before he could say, "We know that's not you...."

"Well, that's great." Regina said, "I mean it. I think it's great that you are coming into your own. What's not so great, as far as I'm concerned, is that you always could have. But apparently if Doris had lived, in spite of her advice, you would have continued to let yourself die on the vine. So, it requires the lack of Doris in the world to give you life.

I call that *murder by attitude!*"

"What the hell does that mean?!"

"Well, as I explained to Marius....."

"You told Marius I *murdered* Doris....???!!!"

“No, of course not. I simply told him I thought it was a kind of ‘metaphysical murder’....”

“That’s ridiculous. There is no such thing.”

“There is. It’s committed by those people who can’t choose life for themselves, who sometimes need other, stronger people to die so they can acquire strength by default, in the vacuum left behind to become fully alive themselves. People like you want nothing less than people like her not to exist so you can feel the world is big enough for you to breathe free.”

“Don’t you dare accuse me of that!!”

Regina had gone too far.

Roscoe would no longer put up with anyone's negative judgment of him.

It was done.

And so was his relationship with his once favorite niece.

He was so angry, he wanted to explode.

CHAPTER FORTY SEVEN

One of Regina's unshakable habits was to stare at nothing.

It was a way of remarshalling her forces, of grabbing hold of the many little pieces of herself from the far corners they had fled into, a way to prepare for battle, for the war between her two selves: being in the world and away from the world. Yet after all the silence and solitude, she was often disgusted with herself that at the bottom of her emptied mind were merely petty slights and small ambitions.

In the desperate gloom that overtook her, Regina reluctantly decided the best way to be prepared for the certain and sudden death the bomber might visit on her was not to have anything or anyone in her life she cared about.

To see if this state of mind was absolutely necessary, she tried an experiment with her dentist. She studied him as he took great care not to cause her pain. He struck her as a kind and lovely man, but not *wonderful*. The necessary "wonder" in wonderful seemed to have disappeared from the old equation between herself and the rest of the world. Without it, being with people was too ordinary for so much work.

First she blamed them. "I spent my whole life not knowing anything real about anyone."

Then she blamed herself: for knowing almost nothing real about herself.

Finally she blamed this inability to care on the new wisdom of having learned through her current crucible of raw nerves, too much now about herself and everyone else.

How will I survive this knowledge! she wondered.

I liked me better the other way.

When I was still stupid.

CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT

i.

BE THANKFUL!

LOVE GOD

ii.

Luckily, Walker had been on duty the day after Thanksgiving.

Regina brought the card, with its cornucopia of bright autumn fruit and nuts nestled over a cartoon picture of an unexploded, but lit, stick of dynamite, to him at the station. It seemed she went to the police station more often than the supermarket.

"It arrived when?" Walker asked.

"I'm not sure," Regina said, " I didn't pick up my mail until we were on our way out to have Thanksgiving dinner at my sister Nina's....."

Walker's cheek made an inadvertent twitch even though he swore he was over Nina. Her pull on him seemed to have disappeared as mysteriously as it had overtaken him. Regina mistakenly thought his facial movement was a reaction to the note.

"..... but since it was Thanksgiving, it could not have come that day,... and I hadn't bothered to get the mail for a day or two before....."

"It must have ruined your dinner," Walker said.

"Yes. Yes, it did."

Walker squinted to check the postmark.

Regina told him, " It's from Florida this time."

"I'll work on it," he said.

iii

"Sweetie...." Angela boomed once again into the phone, "Look, Walker gave me the Thanksgiving card, and now we think we might have some ideas, maybe leads. But I need you to come to the station....Actually, I'm on duty...stuck inside a shipping container...."

"A what....?"

"It's a Mobile Arrest Center. We drive it around neighborhoods like a Blood Bank, or a Bookmobile. Our motto is: Rolling with Crime: We come to you," Angela joked.

"So,... what do I.....?"

"So, we're parked on the West Side, on the big old Marine and Aviation Department pier—which ironically is now neither fish nor fowl--- in the meat packing district. Little West 12th Street and the Hudson River....It's a bit out of the way but you'll find it. Just look for the hookers, transvestites, and cobblestones. You'll be ok. Especially mid-morning,....can you meet me.....?"

"Yes," Regina said, "I'll be there." She would do anything. Even drive on the West Side Highway, mid-morning.

Det. Vega told Regina there was plenty of parking on the large, nearly empty pier. Then she added," You know, maybe the only good reason to move to the mid-west is for the ability to park. I'll bet in Indiana parking is a life-affirming experience...." Then, like everyone else,

Angela asked Regina, " But what do you want to drive in the city for...!"

Regina was tired of the question. But she had perked up at Angela's call, at the notion that the police might finally know something, that she might get back some control.

She was in a hurry to get there; Angela said she was working only half a shift today.

Regina checked the overly large clock on the loft wall. She loved clocks for their simple-minded attempt to deal with a complex universe. Apparently clocks didn't work for everyone. Perpetually late people were described as having 'no sense of time.' "You mean, they have no sense of *my* time," she always wanted to say.

In any case, she had just enough time now for a shower, although she was tempted to skip it. Since she was not a farmer or a laborer made dirty by outside forces, in the modern world a shower was just washing yourself away from yourself. A shower was always a disappointment to her since it never washed away the general paltriness of her naked soul and the embarrassment of her mediocrity, which she felt whenever she entered this state of wished for liquid redemption. Each time she expected a miracle, a transition from her old life into something fresh, new, half expecting to become someone better.

She realized it was a lot to ask ten minutes of hot water to do.

All she ever got was clean.

iv.

Regina walked the block and a half from her loft, over to the open-air parking lot where she kept her car since it was impossible to leave it on the street. She did not want to deal with the “Parking Calendar” and its odd prohibitions and permissions for street cleaning, national and religious holidays, taxi stands, diplomatic immunity, VIP privileges, and weather. The signs—when, where, and how not to park—were so long and complicated, they had become literature.

Nor did she want her car to be towed away again. Never wanted to go back to the car impound again, that place so highly volatile that everyone was overly polite, an eerie unreality, given the New York temperament. But this tightly secured car jail was not the place to vent. There was so much anger it would be explosive. And useless.

Once out of the lot and on to the street, as she waited her turn for the light to change, the car in front of her emitted ear-damaging sounds that filled the entire block with an assault of throbbing, indecipherable noise.

If you could never be sure which cars had brakes, you could be certain which had radios.

v.

The drive uptown was so slow she thought she was a passenger.

She would be forced to wait behind idled, mammoth, street-blocking trucks picking up garbage or delivering soda. Or someone making a movie.

She would wait until time became volumes of nothingness, yet not empty enough to concentrate on some other simple, constructive thing like stomach exercises—pull in, let out—before being distracted by the attention needed behind the wheel of her two-ton killing machine.

All cities have traffic, but in this City of Options, there were no options.

The special nature of a New York bottleneck was its confinement. You could become imprisoned in your car by nowhere else to go. Skyscrapers were necessary in New York because there was nowhere else to go.

But Regina had to go, had to get there, had to see Det. Vega before she went off duty, had to be sure she did not have to wait another day for some solution to her case. She could no longer stand being stalled. In her car, on the road, in her life.

Completely stopped in this maze of powerless horsepower, Regina could see a young man in the car next to her bobbing his head and beating a drum on his steering wheel, his shoulders gyrating to a rhythm only he could hear.

It always made her mad when other drivers didn't suffer enough in traffic.

CHAPTER FORTY NINE

i.

The thing about living in New York City is that a good day is when things don't go as badly as they could have. And only some of the clocks are wrong.

ii.

The thing about living in New York City is that a good day is when things are as great as they could possibly ever be. Anywhere. And some clocks work.

CHAPTER FIFTY

i.

Regina laughed out loud when she saw the Mobile Arrest Center. It was plunked down forlornly in a debris filled corner of an old pier that stored small hills of salt for sanitation trucks to pour onto snowy streets. Rather than giving off a strong police presence, the long rusty container looked like a lost refugee from a disbanded trailer camp.

And these are the people I think can help me? she sighed to herself.

Once inside she was surprised. And suddenly encouraged. It could have been a top-notch media van or air traffic control room. Something could happen.

The computer banks washed the dark, nearly windowless aluminum box in a phosphorescent blue-green glow and, with the constant low murmur of the two-way radios, it felt like the bottom of the ocean.

Detective Angela Vega was on duty alone. She greeted Regina like an old friend, a visitor to her own house. Regina didn't like this. She didn't want the detective to be charming; she wanted her to be effective. She always suspected that Angela's friendliness was one of those phony police things where they want to be your pal so you'll be happy to turn yourself in. Did Det. Vega think Regina was sending the notes to herself? Had Walker told her his crazy idea; did he give Angela instructions to be friends?

"You said you had a suspect,?" Regina asked.

"Well, yes. And no."

"What do you mean?!"

"There are enough notes now so we thought that if we tapped into the data bases of the cities you received the letters from...."

"....the threats...." Regina corrected.

"...as well as the National Crime Data Base, we might be able to match an MO, a pattern that would reveal a bigger picture to us."

"And?"

"And, we couldn't."

Regina had been taut, alert to what miraculous technological progress would be revealed to her in the insulated, hermetically-sealed other-dimension of this metal bathysphere. But now she walked silently, dejectedly, to a hard steel chair. She just wanted to go away, but was forced to stay by her own listlessness and disappointment.

"Why did you call me here, make me take all the trouble to come here? Isn't everything the same as before?"

"That's true. But it's also true that we did think we were getting a break. Besides, I was excited that things might have been getting better for you. When we realized we didn't really have anything concrete, it was too late. You had already left. So I'm sorry. I know you need some progress. We could have picked up a couple of likely suspects, just to see where it took us. But ever since the

bombing at the Olympics in Atlanta, without hard evidence we are all wary of false accusations."

She reached over and momentarily touched Regina's hand in an effort to soothe her.

"You understand, don't you," she asked.

Regina shook her head. Of course she understood. Being falsely accused was a fear to her almost stronger than being blown up.

ii

Regina had been about seven when the incident with the blind man occurred. At Regina's whining insistence, her mother had let her go by herself across the wide busy avenue to the little neighborhood bakery on the other side, watching her all the time, yelling out instructions for crossing traffic: "Wait! Look! Stop! Run!"

Regina triumphantly made it to the forbidden land on the other side of the river of buses and cars and was now herself the repository of all good judgment and wisdom. She was even going to decide on which kind of cake to buy. Her mother said she could. So when the blind man came by, rattling his cup with coins, Regina took charge. She noticed that people were dropping money in the cup, but, poor man, he couldn't see to take it out. Regina would do it for him. Without warning she reached her child's hand into the cup to give him his money, but to her shock he began to scream, " Thief! Thief! Help!" Regina opened her fingers and let the coins fall back in. She staggered away from him as grown-ups circled them both.

"Bad girl! Stop that!" a woman yelled as she slapped Regina's retreating hand.

"...no, I....but...only wanted...." Regina tried to explain.

"Shut up! How could you steal from a blind man!!" someone shouted.

"....I...didn't....just....help...."

"Go home!"

" We don't want little girls like you around here! "

"You should be ashamed! What would your mother say!"

Her mother. Through her tears, Regina could see her mother, who was just getting the picture from the other side, head for the curb. Regina caught a lull in the traffic and flew across into her mother's arms, as the crowd around the blind man still stood glaring at her.

"I didn't do it!" she sobbed to her mother. "I didn't do it! I was just going to give him the money. Please believe me! Please believe me!"

"I believe you," her mother said, "I know you wouldn't do anything like that."

What if her mother hadn't believed her? What if the people who don't love you don't believe you?

And now, she was surprised to see that, like running into her mother's arms, this current see-saw of fear, and then hope, and then fear again made her want to stay enveloped in this aluminum womb under the perceived protection and compassion of Det. Angela Vega.

Regina stared aimlessly into the semi-dark, her shoulders slumped, too lost to move.

Something must be happening to me, she thought. Usually she would have just told Det. Vega in a slightly curt manner, "Well, thanks anyway," picked up her complicated purse in which once more she would not be able to find her car keys as she prepared to gird herself up to fight the traffic again back to her dark loft where she could hide from it all.

But instead she just sat there, her body depleted as a sigh over a steel chair.

CHAPTER FIFTY ONE

Angela apologized for the condition of her cramped, disheveled apartment.

"Apparently life is bigger and more complex than the spaces we set aside for it," she explained jovially, as she hastily tried to clear a path through the papers and books on the floor to the couch where a large pile of clean but still unfolded laundry took up half the seating area. The fabric-softener fresh clothes would have smelled good, except for an overriding odor of dusty cat litter.

Still, Regina was glad to be here now. It struck her that in spite of her own mixed feelings about the detective, she was comforted by Angela who had become, for better or worse, the only partner she had in the trauma that battered her life. By now there was little comfort from others. Everyone had gotten used to, actually annoyed by, her constant fears and depression. One by one they had begun to float away from her. In their haze of hopeful denial, in order to go on with their own lives, they blinded themselves to the depth of her crisis and the way it rattled her soul every minute. They wanted to treat it as some passing incident, like the flu. After all, the police themselves were still saying they couldn't be sure there was anything to worry about.

A huge wave of desperation and loneliness poured over her once again. She got up from the couch and stood in the doorway of the small closet of a room that passed for a

kitchen in the average Manhattan apartment. Angela was noisily putting together something that with a little imagination they might consider a late lunch.

She stood in one spot and, like an octopus, poured the tea kettle, clicked the toaster, and retrieved the cheese from the refrigerator all at the same time. Angela took the plastic tray of tasteless processed cheese sandwiches on burnt white toast and two small boxes of dried raisins out to a scratched and peeling laminate table in the corner of the living room. She gave Regina two mugs of tea encircled with advertising, one for each hand.

As Regina tried to put them down in whatever space she could find among the scattered papers—local flyers, Chinese food menus, torn bits with phone numbers, ripped out magazine articles, unopened bills, backs of empty envelopes with reminder notes now long forgotten—the paper tea tags fell into the liquid. There were no spoons. Regina did not have much appetite but she sat dutifully in one of the stained, sagging canvas camp chairs. The cat saw this as his cue to come out from his corner and walk to the other side of the room on top of the table, sniffing the food.

Apparently Angela never closed a closet door. As Regina carefully sipped the hot tea, she found herself staring into an open utility closet with brooms, dustpans, a vacuum way in the back, plastic bags wadded together, dirty used sponges, a straw hamper with overflowing dirty laundry, and all sorts of insecticides on the shelf. When she first came into the apartment, she had noticed the coat closet

at the entrance was also open, but thought that might have been for convenience. Now she realized several kitchen cabinets as well as the medicine chest in the bathroom all remained hanging ajar.

Angela joined Regina at the table, picked up her steaming hot tea and settled comfortably into her surroundings.

“People disappoint you.” Angela said to a startled Regina as though she had read her mind.

Regina did not have time to respond.

“ We all disappoint each other; emotional contracts are only as good as the people we have them with,” Angela went on without skipping a beat and with no intention of doing so, although she had no trouble skipping from idea to idea. And even here the sound of her voice seemed too big for the small apartment and began to irritate the nerve endings on Regina’s skin, the way jazz or Bach often did.

“Dealing with people is like dying of thirst and trying to drink water through a pinched straw. You get something but not nearly enough. It's inevitable, you know, ...part of the human condition....personal demons... and all that. It seems to me that most people either consume their own flesh or yours. Some only hurt themselves. Others are more than willing to feed you to the lions that stalk them.

Yet we continue to expect too much from relationships. And why not? When you think about it, most of what we know comes from other people. We start out with nothing, and somebody else puts in all the stuff we have in our brain. Actually, sometimes not liking a person teaches you a great deal about yourself. Without knowing it, your own

soul comes up and looks around and sees the other person is not a good fit. Then you know better the shape of your own soul. When you brush up against someone else, you brush up against yourself."

It was true, Regina thought. She often saw the unsuspected scope of her own personality when crashing against another person in intimacy. She had already begun to consider her own lack of peachy-ness there. Intimacy could make her a tyrant, with her irrational rages against bad coffee and cheddar cheese.

"Don't you know me?!" she would scream, "do you willfully disregard who I am by making assumptions for me by switching vegetables?!"

No wonder somebody wants to blow me up, she sighed.

CHAPTER FIFTY TWO

i.

In her exhaustion from trying to keep panic at bay, she had picked up a new nervous habit.

She compulsively read signs.

Over and over and over again.

If she stopped at a beautiful alpine overlook, she would turn from the vista to read the signs: NO LITTERING. NO BALLPLAYING. TRUCKS PROHIBITED. Not once, but all during the time she remained there.

She could not help reading every sign no matter what or where it was. If there were signs in places where she went everyday---NO EXIT. NO SMOKING. IN CASE OF FIRE DO NOT TAKE ELEVATOR. BATHROOMS FOR PATRONS ONLY. UTILITY SHUT-OFF LOCATIONS. OUT OF ORDER. TOILET SEAT COVERS---she would read those signs like it was the first time, every time she went in.

She read messages on store awnings—GROCERIES. APPITIZERS. GORMET DELI. EAT IN. TAKE OUT. FREE DELIVERY. 24 HOUR DINER. When stopped for a light, she would read a billboard---UNBEATABLE AUTHORIZED DEALER. GOING OUT OF BUSINESS SALE--again and again even if she passed it often and had read it many times before. She read the sides of trucks and buses: CAREER OPPORTUNTIY. NO INTEREST FOR ONE YEAR! VARICOSE VEINS GONE FOREVER.

Each time she would read the same sign she would say: “I already saw that,” and then force herself not to look at it anymore and the next time she came across it, she would read it all over again. In fact, at this moment she was reading the same advertisement on Angela’s tea mug every time she lifted the cup to her lips.

But not just signs. When she passed a place that had been part of her personal history, she would go through that history in her head each time, on every street, at every house where a friend had lived even if the friend were long gone. Or at a place where she once worked. “I used to work there,” she would say to herself as she drove by, even if she had said it to herself every time before.

She had started going through her loft making strange sounds, little moans of aloneness; then talking out loud and progressing to inadvertently having audible conversations with herself in ladies’ room stalls, becoming one of those people she always thought when she heard them: “Well, they’ve lost it.”

It might be ok to live with these new obsessions. She would just say to herself, “This is nuts. I’m nuts,” and then accept it. But this inner agitation was taking its toll. One would think that in the face of perceived sudden death, she would have developed a wide, generous view of daily life. But instead she had become teeth-grindingly irritated...when paper clips stuck together, when the clerk was too slow to give change, at the friend who could never remember how her stove worked.

And at herself, for the life that was not what she had originally seen in her mind's eye.
She needed a new vision for her mind's eye.

ii

Her mind's eye couldn't see one.
All it could see was the cold, gray fog of being left behind.
By everyone, it seemed, all at once.
Now, when she needed them most.

iii.

It was tiring, trying to make a boy take the place of the man she lost.

Drew had become a collection of traits Regina could see without awe. “I don’t know what to do,” she told Nina, “After all, I care about him enough to protect him from my opinion of him.”

As it turned out she didn’t have to do anything. Her ordinary behavior did the job: her fear, crankiness, depression, unavailability; her never wanting to go out, always wanting to be back early, the involuntary curfew she imposed on them both.

“There is too much life in life for you to miss it *on purpose*,” even Detective Angela Vega had chided her.

Regina had gotten rigid about places she would go in the city, never wanted to be away on vacation, and didn’t go to see Drew in the theater anymore.

“It’s all banal, obvious, shallow, with a fear of intelligence, and a love of clichés,” Regina jabbed at him when pressed about why she was absent more and more often.

It was sad that in the little theaters where Drew acted, all the eager good will and hard work produced only an earnest mediocrity. In addition, these off-beat venues were hermetically sealed and claustrophobic. They smelled of old, unclean fabric. She felt she would scream if she had

to be closed in captivity to watch one more bad play done badly in a bad place.

She remembered when it used to be different. Once the theater was where philosophy and literature could collide in three dimension, provoking a thrill that would run up one's spine. Apparently it became too strong an experience for the celebrating out-of-towners who bought the tickets, and the rich kids who formed the Yale School of Drama's theater mafia.

Poor Drew, if some of these plays ever made their way to public access television or the internet, he could have the privilege of being embarrassed for the rest of his life.

iv.

Even so, she expected Drew would stay content in their relationship as long as there was a lot of sex and a decent amount of laughing. Regina had changed even that. All the prized young trysting had started to make her feel well fucked but not well loved, at a time when she loved no one, but did not want to be unloved.

“Since you worked so hard at pushing me away, you may want to congratulate yourself on your success,” he said, on the day he told her that he was moving to the West Coast.

Like Marius, he tried to make it seem entirely her fault, blame her for something he was wanting to do, take no responsibility for what worked between them and what didn’t. In any case, she knew it was inevitable that sooner or later he would do this. He had often talked about going to Portland or Seattle. He had friends who had gone out there and they told him it might be easier to find work. Those areas had become hot spots for making cheap movies, and theater companies were not unheard of. Anyway, it wasn’t so expensive, life had a softer swing to it, and it was prettier; what more could someone without much soul stamina want?

“Well,” Nina said, when Regina told her Drew was leaving, “ You had a good run while it lasted. And at least he came

from the generation that would never dream of prefacing what he wanted you to do for him with the words, 'if your aim in life is to please me...'”

v.

Marius was getting married again.

“Another one?” her sister asked, “He passes from wife to wife like an Olympic torch.”

“ I guess he is going to keep doing it until he gets it right,” Regina’s jealousy provoked her to respond. “But now is a bad time,” she lamented.

“When would be a good time for you,” Nina pointed out.

Regina no longer needed him to be her husband, but it was important that he remain available to her as her friend. Now, as nature would take its own course—as water would seek its own level, and all those other platitudes—he would simply drift away from her into his new life. It wouldn’t be--couldn’t be--helped.

It was inevitable she would be without him.

It was inevitable that one day in a theater, or on a street, they would run into each other and he wouldn’t even say “hello” because his new wife wouldn’t let him.

Would he call the next day and say he was sorry and that he had made a pact with the devil and would never do it again?

Would Regina forgive him?

Would she simply explain to Nina: “He can’t help who he loves.”

But for today she said only, “ I hear she sells dolls through the mail. After all the years he tried to push me into it, I should have realized how important it was for him to have a woman in the mail order business.”

What really upset her now was that the one thing she had counted on Marius for would be taken away from her before she could get to use it. She wanted to say to him, “There is information you have about me that would be very helpful, very important. Information that could help me correct mistakes of behavior. With this information I could stop whatever I was doing long before it damaged others, or myself. I wish you would tell me.” He wouldn’t have, anyway. He was afraid she would want to know from him why he could not continue to love her. But he didn’t know.

CHAPTER FIFTY THREE

i.

Christmas was only a few weeks away and instead of all the people in Regina's life coming together, they were moving apart.

But which of them would she want to remain with her? Which of them would she want with her if these were her last moments?

The facts were clear: Doris was dead, and Uncle Roscoe, the former butterfly turned caterpillar, had broken off with his perceptive niece. Nina was away, having discovered the anti-gravity forces near the bottom of the sea. Drew was fleeing Regina's solemnness.

And simply time itself, even without Marius' impending marriage, was taking its toll on the wobbly friendship with him. As she had feared, he was available to her less and less, and with a more distracted sense of duty, as he got further into his life without her. She realized how strong her feelings of abandonment were when she was surprised by regret that even Detective Walker had no reason to call her anymore.

She tried to rationalize that if she had no one in her life, it was the way she actually preferred it.

This was only partly true.

She was as sad about not wanting them as not having them.

ii

Was it only Angela who was left to her---only Det. Vega who insisted on being her friend? Could she replace her losses by turning Angela into the new “pal of the heart” she thought she needed?

Regina had begun to think maybe she had not given Angela enough credit from the start.

“I never give anyone else beside myself enough credit for anything,” she had chastised herself. “Perhaps I made up my mind about her too early.”

But even as Angela’s support and concern for her continued to unfold before her eyes, Regina took a second look. Regina craved dialogue; with Angela she got monologue. And Angela’s house was like her conversation: it had the non-cohesion of mercury, the dizziness of a refracting prism.

It was one more reminder of how first impressions remained true, no matter how much Regina wanted to accept a good idea wherever it came from.

CHAPTER FIFTY FOUR

I

Over tea, Detective Angela Vega had watched Regina close herself off from any possibility they could be friends. She thought Regina seemed caught in a downward spiral of self-inflicted loss.

Even so, she was disappointed in Regina's unspoken rejection. Disappointed, but not surprised. Angela had an inkling that most people were generally pushed away by her critical and difficult world view.

Still, she thought "...hell, people worse than me are loved. Ok, so I might be a little over the top. Maybe I should pull back, shut up a little, not pound everybody over the head with every thought that ever crossed my mind.

After all, people hate it when you give them a good idea."

.

CHAPTER FIFTY FIVE

i.

It was raining hard when Regina left Angela's apartment.

She had things to worry about, other than whether she was throwing away the opportunity to enter friendship's golden door. Lord knows, she had been wrong before. More pressing was her awareness that the upcoming holiday was ripe for another card. Another threat.

Her birthday. Thanksgiving. Now Christmas.

In the rain, the car's windshield was a vista of backlit, hazy streaks, an effect she much desired for her paintings, but which was unwelcome on the road. The wipers alternated between opaque and smear. When she finally got an opening onto the twisting East River Drive that bordered one side of the city, it took too long to catch up to the highway's rhythm, so she thought it better to stay far over in the slow lane. Regina had driven this route so many times before that she just let the car wend its own way along in a kind of soothing waltz.

The cold rain was beginning to form an icy layer over the curvy roadway and it was not possible to avoid the flooding caused by bad drainage. Nor the mysterious karma of the roadbed itself, which had been constructed with the rubble of London buildings bombed out in the German blitz of World War II, then carried to New York

from a decimated Britain as ballast in the holds of returning American war ships.

Where was the dreaded card for Christmas? she thought. The holiday was very near. Would she even get one? When? Could it get lost in the heavy holiday mail? If one didn't come for Christmas would it keep her on pins and needles until New Year's?

Would the new year start with a real bang?

Would it be worse if none came at all? The bomb guy said when bombers are serious, they don't warn you in advance. Maybe he—whoever—was getting ready for the real one. Knowing another threat might, or might not, be in the works, she wondered how she could steady herself this time for its continuing impact on her life, either way. Every moment of peace and relief made her feel stupidly, innocently naive.

The worst part was the BOO! factor, the irony that death, that sure thing, was uncertain. Waiting for something to happen, something to suddenly jump out at her from doorways and corners, produced a constant low, rumbling dread. Then confusion. What to do? Is it here? Is it there? A nightmare confinement of multiple mirrors.

Suddenly the car flew out of her hands.

Regina loved take-offs. While other passengers on the plane were white knuckling it and chewing gum, she absorbed into herself the pure joy of lifting off the earth. She also loved landing: the harsh, bumpy, practicality of it.

But not this.

The car shot across two lanes of oncoming traffic, bounced off the concrete barrier which separated automobiles coming in the opposite direction, and careened back across the highway before coming to a stop against the opposite wall, totaling the car.

As she was flying through the air, she unexpectedly took on the passivity of snow and said to herself, "Ah, so this is when I die, and where." She became extremely happy that she would die in New York City and that at her funeral they most likely would play the song, "She's a Native New Yorker."

She was amazed at how accepting she was, how she saw her own death as just some lackluster stupidity. It wasn't that she didn't care: she just didn't care right then. She was more interested in the information than the consequences. This was probably a better way, she thought. Everyone is curious about when and how they die. If this really were a bomb instead of a slow motion car crash she wouldn't have the gift of time to appreciate her own demise.

She didn't die.

But she had become fragile as an egg from the simple act of driving in the rain.

ii.

A pleasant and methodical emergency room nurse had just given her a tetanus shot. And a tranquilizer. The deep gash in her forehead had been cleaned and prepped with local anesthesia for stitches. Every muscle hurt from the contradictory momentum of her body being pulled by the force of the crash while at the same time being grabbed back by the seat belt.

Even so, it was comfortable lying there on a soft, steady surface with her eyes closed to the bright overhead light that felt like sunshine.

She lay there quietly and was appalled that she had not been afraid to die.

iii.

Even the sky fades. And if the sunset, or the rainbow, lasts too long, you are glad the beauty finally goes away. There isn't time for it all. Throughout her life, Regina's half-hearted attempts to put her daily concerns second to the universe, had failed her. Perhaps now a new perspective was presenting itself.

"I thought I was going to die, and even I didn't care."

Lying there, looking at the ceiling, being interrogated by the penetrating light directly above, feeling woozy enough from the pain killers to prevent her from marshalling her psychological defenses, or rationalizing her emotional habits, she couldn't fight seeing how wrongheaded her life had been, how she was generally on the wrong side of what worked.

She had the opportunity that near unconsciousness brings of the uncomfortable awareness of all her past transgressions, large and small; of seeing full force her mistakes, vices, annoying idiosyncrasies, her exaggerated sense of self-importance, her unintended cruelties, thoughtlessness, stupid comments, and bad-tipping, which loomed up like hallucinations to devour her. Some of them she just made up on the spot to fit her feelings of regret. She knew she wasn't terrible. She didn't have anything so interesting as a dark side. She was merely a dreary and mistaken person.

Yet in her condition she did not have the strength to stop herself from being embarrassed by herself. If it's true, she

thought, that all the bad things you do come back to you, why not the good things too, which never seem to return. However, she could not bring the good immediately to mind.

“I don’t love well,” she told the overhead light. “Because my passions are fierce and my pain sharp, I believe I love well. But this is just one more misunderstanding.”

She was going to have to do better. She would have to change.

But how to do it? To say “change is hard” is well worn enough to be elevator music. For Regina change might be *too* hard; knowing she could be stupid didn’t mean she knew how to fix it.

As the drip from the intravenous tube started to make her sleepy, she tried desperately to hold on to the thought that was pushing itself into her vanishing awareness: “Obviously I can’t take myself so seriously anymore, can’t keep sleepwalking my life away with this continuing fear of death...which, apparently is not even real! Instead, I should hurry to welcome the two-sided devil of joy and unspeakable sadness. The universe may have time. I don’t.”

Regina moaned as the nurse came in to check the bandages on her face.

“This wisdom thing is killing me,” she said.

To the nurse’s amusement.

CHAPTER FIFTY SIX

i

After having lived in paralyzing fear for so long, the knowledge that she wasn't afraid to die seemed strange to Regina. Now she felt keenly interested in pursuing the mad dash of time in a new way.

"I was half dead worrying about being dead," she told Nina after the accident, " and punishing myself for not living up to my own ideas of a good life."

"You've had a good life," Nina said.

"Yes, but not the life I had in mind. Not the textured, brocaded, embroidered, embossed, baroque, burgundy, silk, opal, extraordinary, ruby life I had in mind

"Oh, please!" Nina said. "I'm just happy to stick around for Daylight Savings Time,"

ii.

What does it mean to feel alive everyday? She knew she appreciated hot water. And was glad to live in the age of toilet paper.

Closer to the terror, Regina had craved simply that her dread would stop, that her life would have a sweet uneventfulness. She had longed for the pleasure of going through a day where things could be counted on to remain the same and even boredom could be cherished. But now, further along to that place where she realized she was no longer afraid to die, she wondered whether a peaceful vacuum would be enough.

She was sure there could be much more happiness. There had been a time, early on, when she took happiness and all the bright moments that came with it for granted. There had been a time when she carried sunshine in her head. All things were hers; she expected it. Good fortune was always there to be had. It was her right:

*"I soar with the joy of my life,
the freedom,
delicious, liquid,
torrential
freedom
to come and go
and always
find everything
everywhere.*

But her recent life with its sour information changed all that. She had become afraid to feel happy, or safe, or hopeful, and now she had to figure out how to get it back again, if not in the same way, at least in ways that felt the same.

She knew this would be harder to do than knowing it should be done.

Nina was happy.

When Nina fell forward for the first time from the low platform at the edge of the boat that took beginners out to the coral reef, it became all she ever wanted to do.

Pulling the goggles that rested on her forehead down over her eyes, placing the mouthpiece between her teeth, and checking to see if the breathing tube was upright, she took the plunge into the warm, emerald green Caribbean sea.

It was the quiet, the primitive quiet, the immediate silence that first captured her.

While everyone else chased colorful fish, Nina just wanted to cavort. In the absence of the gravity that kept her immobile on land, she would spin and romp along the seabed floor. Out here the reef was deep enough for the full force of the ocean to hold her almost standing upright, but shallow enough to let the current move, as she ordinarily could not, one foot in front of the other, the soles of her finless feet sinking into the sandy soil, and for the first time in her adult life, allowing her to take a short, bouncy underwater stroll.

No one had to explain joy to *her*.

iv.

Regina had always worried that she would get the meaning of life wrong, but now she made up her mind about a couple of things.

One was to admit that it would not be possible for her to remain constantly aware of life's balance sheet, that she would become exhausted from continually not taking anything for granted—and that, if as Nina said, every part of life is extraordinary--- she would disappoint all the gods she was supposed to regularly thank for all the extraordinariness behind each ordinary thing.

She could not even remain aware of the extraordinariness of her own ordinary body, of the rich liquid gushing around inside the balloon of her skin. One would think it would tickle, at least. Instead, it flowed on as much outside of her consciousness as a river in a different city.

The second thing Regina decided.....determined, yet still muddled.... was she would have to get rid of everything in her life that didn't work, and that---- if she were to be alive at all---she would have to paint again.

CHAPTER FIFTY SEVEN

i.

Sometimes a good day is just a couple of new ideas.

The work didn't have to be perfect; the universe was not perfect.

It didn't even have to be a success.

A famous composer of Broadway musicals Regina knew had been a huge success, a household word. He had startled and shocked the world. The walls of his apartment were covered with the familiar posters and awards recognizable to everyone as icons for the last half century. His Broadway shows had been seen and loved for their accurately catching life as it was about to explode into something different. Yet, he was broke. No one would back him in any new venture or even hire him for an old one. The time for his work seemed to have come and gone. He was facing jail in a squabble over copyrights. His children refused to answer his phone calls. He was slump-shouldered, miserable, and desperate. But his walls remained covered with the frozen proof of how the world had loved him. It was too easy to please the world.

Her paintings would never please, because they were not easy work, done easily. And it had become too ludicrous for Regina to keep up her old obsession for immortality. As much as she had once hoped she would live forever through her art, she understood that the most she could expect was to be misunderstood now.

CHAPTER FIFTY EIGHT

He was finished with “**R**”

After all this time he imagined the impact of his empty threats on “**R**egina” surely would be less than he wanted.

He wanted gasps. Like a bad silent movie.

Clearly it was time to find **E**: **Ellie, Evelyn, Esther, Eve, Esmerelda, Ellen, Edith, Evan, Elena, Elizabeth, Eustace, Edwidge, Elaine, Erin, Estelle, Evangeline, Edye, Enid, Emma, Ennis, Eleanor, Erica, Edna, Edwina, Eartha.....**

How would he start this time?

But there was no starting.

It was inevitable that his caged violence and entrenched sadism would eventually fall back on him. His life sentence lulled him into indifference toward whatever trouble he could get into for whatever reason. But this time he picked the wrong fight.

And now no one on the outside world would be **S.C.A.R.E.D** anymore.

CHAPTER FIFTY NINE

If only this could be an ordinary spring.

She had waited, but there had been no Christmas card. By then she knew by heart the formula the alleged bomber used, and could probably write a credible threat herself. It would have shown Three Wise Men on the front, and inside it would say “It’s a Wise Man who knows three on a match won’t bring good cheer.” And include three matches. She couldn’t make up her mind if they should be burned out or not.

But a card never arrived. Not then, nor for the New Year, when the clamorous brightness of the city challenged the dark universe with the illusion of securing us to the planet. There were not even any threats in between or since.

Maybe it was over.

Maybe it wasn’t.

She had cautiously started—with the weary insistence of Detective Walter-- to enter the era of it “probably not” going to happen again.

She was beginning to adopt the gamblers’ syndrome: after a loss, the brain thinks it is due for a win. Regina could feel herself slowly letting down her guard, beginning to feel safe to feel safe. She had already stopped jumping at the explosive sound of thunder and returned to hearing it as the drum roll to a grand light show.

The first time she left her loft without thinking about what terrible thing might happen next, it was like suddenly

getting over the flu. There seemed to be air lifting up the bones of her spine and a switch turned on behind her eyes. She felt like a whole person again.

But she was not depending solely on the absence of threats—she was beginning to give herself good things.

ii.

It was a small start.

She vowed to wear only matching underwear.

She accepted that coffee and summer were their own rewards.

She thought about changing her bank password to LIFE.

She reversed her attitude towards panhandlers and worried less that they would use the money to slowly kill themselves, but instead honored their requests to let them feel some moment of success in their daily round of pain and embarrassment.

She took a certain pleasure in knowing how things are.

But more difficult and resistant to change was her promise to herself to paint again.

She knew she had to do it, but she still didn't know why.

Just being no longer afraid to die, didn't make living easy.

She could hardly bear again the straightjacket of the painting life, the voluntary house arrest. The memory of the necessary isolation almost sent her screaming out of the dark loft into the bright sunshine of the streets. In the past it had helped if she had someone with whom she could thrash out all these conflicting emotions of not wanting to paint and being compelled to. There had always been Marius, for better or worse. Now who? Nina would listen, but try as she might to be a good sister, it wouldn't be long before her eyes glazed over and Regina would realize she was talking to herself.

CHAPTER SIXTY

Regina needed Doris.

So what could she do?

People pray to the dead all the time.

She wasn't up for that.

But the little flags on which Tibetan monks sent prayers out with the mountain winds to whatever heaven there was, seemed like a rather poetic and symbolically satisfying gesture.

She realized that everything she wanted to talk to Doris about was probably too long for a prayer flag, but she had become flexible and was willing to create her own version.

Instead of cloth blowing in the high clear air, she would tack up a much larger paper version on her studio bulletin board where she kept small rough sketches and swatches of color.

There, it too might welcome life changes and become part of a greater cycle.

So she began:

*“ My dear Doris,
I am sorry my stubbornness did not allow me tell you when
you were alive how often you were right. Well, you were
right again: I am going to paint, in spite of myself.
But it is not so simple as that.*

I still ponder, as you and I have done in many of our past conversations, why anyone should move away from the generosity of life into the selfishness of art.

During my recent hiatus from the foolish angst of the “artistic” life, I thought I was free of all these questions without answers. But apparently not.

So maybe I have come up with a fragile understanding. At least for myself.

It is impossible for us to understand the incomprehensible interior of others, especially because ordinary expression falls so short. How can we know what others are unable to reveal?

Art may be the tool to remedy this unhappy situation, since it speaks what we want to tell, but can hardly say.

It may be the map that guides our differing souls through the strange lands of each other. Or A downloading of one person’s consciousness onto another; a way to feel the kick in someone else’s gut.

It may offer reassurance of the already known; possibly reveal the never known .It is a portrait of our mutuality. It helps us become each other.

Art is the Exchange of Mysteries.”

She paused, certain that Doris would say it was all pompous nonsense, if she could say anything at all. “Well,” Regina continued defiantly to her aunt, “It’s my definition. I can make up any one I want.”

What she wanted was for the world to understand itself.

ii.

Regina gave herself freedom. She made a choice.

Choice: the very core of joy.

She had given up her fear of being surprised by dying.

Now, she would choose to give up her fear of living badly.

And just live.

One morning at 5 a.m. she awoke with a strange restlessness. "What is this?" she wondered.

She had been awakened by happiness.

It wasn't a grand happiness, but apparently she had begun to accumulate again the small joys that could hold their own.

THE END