



Needing Family No Matter What

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Needing Family
An Adoption Story

Naomi Barber Pignatelli
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Needing Family An Adoption Story

I wrote this book about adopting Luca to try to explain as well as to understand how I found myself at nearly fifty engaged once again in the simultaneously miraculous and ordinary process of having a baby and formulating a suitable family life in which he could flourish. My experiences in this realm had been mixed at best. I had already raised two biological children more than 20 years Luca's senior, and had dissolved a marriage which failed to provide for the wholesome and necessary needs and demands of family life. As much as I enjoyed being a mother, being a wife had been bitter and unhappy. I had, as well, been a daughter in a classic mother/daughter struggle in which each party never were up to the task of figuring out why it wasn't working but knew or decided unequivocally and irrevocably that it just wouldn't and couldn't. Still I persisted, hoping perhaps to shift the paradigm.

In a unique and disconcerting way, the process of adoption is a thoroughly conscious and deliberate act. Rarely is one so close to the act of choosing. Rarely is the act of choosing so indelible, so irreversible. And as I got further involved in the adoption of Luca, I discovered that it was a weighty and sacred trust to locate a baby who was a veritable stranger and promise to keep him and care for him as if he were flesh and blood.

As adoption was at one time inscrutable and overwhelming to me, so was it my desire to make it less so for others. In that spirit, I wanted to detail each aspect of our adoption from the decision making process to the fulfillment of the necessary court and bureaucratic requirements.

A journal I kept forms the center of this book. It was written on a day-to-day, sometimes moment-to-moment basis. I wrote it to keep the experience as it was

happening outside myself, for I knew that kept inside, it could lead to irrevocable emotional chaos, and even madness.

Naomi Barber Pignatelli

Introduction

It was all about family. A longing for that compelling institution which had failed twice for me already. To have a family, I put myself in a situation in which I was subjected to a kind of emotional torment that became comprehensible only after I understood this.

It was not only loneliness, sex, security, a fear of dying, an empty nest that drove me, but a need to be a part of, to be at the center of, to be the source of, the energizer of this thing called family.

It was so primitive, so basic, so fundamental. Not filled with erudition, or romance, or mystery. I needed to be part of a family. God, I needed to be woven into the fabric of - like a good Harris tweed - I needed to blend, the woof and warp - muted like fall colors against the wide expanse of sky, hill, meadow. I needed to be part of something small.

The grandness of my dreams - and they are grand - my appetites - and they great - my capacity for passion - my need for the creative - my intuitiveness which is powerful - all these failed to impale, extinguish, dim my voracious, driven need for a home, another home, and another family. That basic, that fundamental, that simple.

"No empty nest for you," my eldest son said to me. In the natural order of things, was there a time we were supposed to achieve that stature - after we had disposed of our obligation to reproduce and populate the land? Was there an appropriateness, a time and a place? Were we to follow the messages in our bodies as they shut down, shut out the possibility to carry a child? I don't know if these are conventions or if these things are fixed in time and place.

My urges exceeded my wisdom or I wouldn't let them interfere. The story which follows is the journey which took me out of my solitary and exclusionary

state back into the fabric of family life into which I got tightly woven.

"I stay married to him because I need someone to buy a croissant for;" a wise older woman once told me. I build families because I need people who care for me and to care for. Finding and building this family is the subject of what follows.

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This eye
is not for weeping
its vision
must be unblurred
though tears are on my face
its intent is clarity
it must forget
nothing

Adrienne Rich

"From the Prison House"

I went to Paraguay because I am an "elder primate" whose body could no longer bear children. I married a man nearly eight years my junior without children of his own. We felt we were in a love which needed to be completed with a family. So, we turned toward the world of adoption.

I was having difficulty conceiving and keeping a pregnancy going, stealing off almost obsessively, day after day, month after month, to drain my bladder, top off my urine into a vial as if I were conducting a home chemistry experiment. Only to watch my essence register in the no pregnancy zone on the color chart. Trying to balance my increasing need and love for Frank with an uncooperative body and a burgeoning forboding of barrenness. Yet unready to reveal this looming reality. The burden of the choice, lapsing into a love with a man finally eager to build a family with a woman clandestinely trying to grapple with and magically reverse her diminished fertility. I held out Sarah as a beacon of hope, a standard against which I would not yield. Her body bearing fruit verging on another life. I had been pregnant before. Conceiving and bearing children was nothing I had ever given thought to. It seemed to happen almost too easily and perhaps even at odds with my will. I had even conceived twice using contraception. Having a family had never before been a condition of love. Images of myself being deposed because of my barrenness kept flashing through my mind. Intensifying the agony of these unrevealed negative pregnancy tests was the increasing recognition that my love for Frank had already gone far beyond choice. I was too late to run or challenge the predicament I found myself in. I had unremittingly fallen in love with Frank and the question of having a family in earnest would inevitably surface and have to be reconciled. As months piled up and still I was not pregnant, we decided to consult my gynecologist, who was aware of the fact that I was trying to conceive from

informal exchanges we'd had during my visits. With deep trepidation, I had suggested to Frank that we do this, for not only would we be adding science to the unquantifiable and mysterious ways of conception, but my gynecologist, a woman, was some ten years my junior, most probably fecund, and about Frank's age.

After introductions were made, she entered the dialogue saying, "Life is unfair to women. Women, however we like it, have a biological clock ticking within, and a finite number of eggs, which sooner or later run out. Women over forty, considered medically as "elderly primigravidas" or elder primates, typically had greater difficulty conceiving and carrying a baby and then producing one who was normal. And, however we like it, men could go on reproducing forever." The finite and the infinite! She continued, "Frank, you have to decide if you really want a child, if you want to have a biological child, and if so, you might have to consider finding a different, younger, more fertile woman. Maybe you want to remain childless. If, finally, you do indeed want to stay with Naomi, you might have to seriously consider the question of adoption. (Turning then to me, by this time barely breathing with the weight and directness of these considerations, almost as if I had submitted to being autopsied and biographed pre-death.) To me she said, "Naomi, after nearly a twenty year hiatus, do you really want to raise another child?" My own biologically born two children Jeremy and Rebecca were now entering their late teens and early twenties. Heavy silence brought our session to an end.

We left her office at the rim of Central Park enveloped in our own thoughts as the day broke into a rosy sunset. How did a flirtation lead to this? How did weekends broken off from loneliness and formlessness bring us to face such harsh and undeniable realities? How did fleeing from Sundays, and the pages of betrothal announcements in the Times force epic decisions like these? I was no innocent. I

knew what babies did and brought to one's life. My psychology books were riddled with case studies of marriages which began to unravel with the entrance and introduction of a child. That few loves could hold up under the scrutiny and discipline of a baby's total need for dependence. That women found life lines in child rearing that were often more enticing and necessary than their love of a man. That the gaze between mother and child could predominate and shut out the man who would stray off to be consoled and comforted by the army of waiting female arms before they too were catapulted into maternal longing. That men got naturally cast off because it took longer for that kind of bonding to catch on, if they could even get close enough to try. That men began to want, to desire what was being given someone too small to even know or demand the unqualified, uninterrupted connection. That spasms of jealousy, erupting into rage and a form of male distemper further threw the wedge, the balance off. Babies did break up relationships. But babies could also join people in a rare and mystical and eternal way. Finally, I knew that if a choice were ever broached or put to the test, however it would hurt me, I could never choose a man over a child. These thoughts hammered through me as we walked. Our shoulders touching, each of us had to pick through our life experiences, and our most rock bottom inner truths to find what next step we would make toward each other. The first information I gave myself about this meeting was that I was the one who had orchestrated this, brought this on, found this way to focus our dilemma and to work it through to the next level. This pleased me about myself and apparently heartened Frank and increased his trust and his feelings for me. He was particularly attentive and tender during dinner.

The doctor had recently started me on a regime of hormones to lessen the burden of premature aging, as well as to stimulate my reproductive system. She was a strong advocate of estrogen replacement therapy. Atrophying vaginas and

osteoporosis don't reverse themselves she informed me. Yet more ominous things to face, as we struggled with my reluctant, withholding body, so I had to confront my youthfulness as it became like parchment, a fleeting memory. And then, as life would have it, my body spasmed into revolt. The estrogen replacement therapy, my avenue to youthfulness and the possibility for reproduction, triggered off a dormant, undiagnosed fibroid tumour which grew so rapidly that it ultimately blocked my ability to urinate. Without much choice, I had to submit to a full hysterectomy, ovaries and all. And so I found myself minus my female parts, a form of castration, with my beautiful, younger love by my hospital bedside. Now it was all out in the open. One choice was eliminated forever, the possibility of my ever bearing another child, along with the fact that I was indeed, never again, to be defined as a female because of a monthly letting of blood. My gynecologist was moved by the kindness, devotion, attentiveness, and understanding displayed by Frank during this time. She had become nearly an alter-ego to our relationship, a witness and a partner at the most fundamental level.

Soon after the operation, while I was still wobbly, Frank said almost imperceptibly one evening, "Why don't you see what you can find out about adoption." And I lurched into action. Our relationship had found me in the role of researcher and unearther. I was too overcome by a feeling of relief to give this information more than surface thought. Without further discussion or clarification, I went to the bookstore and bought an adoption handbook. If anything could discourage anyone it was that book. After leafing through it and stumbling over unfamiliar words, I began to think of the whole thing as unimaginable and futile. I would have to find a way to live without Frank. By now that was like cutting out my heart or chopping off a couple of limbs. To familiarize myself with adoption, I leafed through my book daily, mentioning this pursuit randomly, primarily to strangers, and mentally mulling the real prospect of being a mother

again, so that I could engender it, it could begin taking place, happening, forming within me, in much the same way it did while I was waiting for the births of my own Jeremy and Rebecca. Only this time, I would be over fifty as I escorted my child to school on the first day. How would he or she feel about having a much older mother, and how would I? What would life be like on the park bench at my station in life?

Would I be like a Koren cartoon in the New Yorker off on bench by myself, throwing nuts at squirrels, as I cooed to my drooling infant? Would I again be having to say goodbye to someone? Someone so small, so unyielding, so unsure that if you left you did indeed disappear. Someone to teach that people part, leave each other and come back together again. Someone shedding desperate tears, pleading, grabbing onto legs, holding back, holding on as if to a life raft, as if drowning, having gone down twice, as if air would evaporate, breath would stop, the light would go out if I left him. Someone feeling and believing that darkness, blackness would crawl in, the fright, the sheer, perpetual fright of being left alone to tend to oneself, when knowing one couldn't take care of oneself. "Who will call Grandma to come get us if you get killed in a car crash?" Rebecca asked when she was 4 or 5, as we were leaving to go out one night. "Who will?" She demanded shrilly. "I don't know how to dial the phone." Will I be having to leave someone else to go to work, never easy again in my job? Unnerved when the sitter or school called, and inevitably they would. Would I again be sliced in two, never being fully anywhere, neither at work nor at home? Compromising personal ambition and maternal obligation, cutting corners, running from one thing to the other, never fully present, there. Cheating on everyone, everything, always out of breath, always just moments behind schedule. Could my heart once again hear, "A cry that never left the throat of man before," as my baby lay prone on a floor, gasping as I walked off, looking the other way? These words were written about Rebecca as I broke apart,

splintered, leaving her behind for my job when she was 2. Again was I getting into the same dilemma for myself?

I gravitated to the slew of magazine articles I found everywhere about the advent of the older mother. Suddenly it seemed like the height of trendiness. Women over forty on the marquees of movie theaters were pushing carriages between films. Whether this was the case and I was right there in the center of fashion, or whether I was simply trying to find soul mates in the public eye to appease and calm my conflicted mind, I don't know. But I found articles in publications I never read before placed, and kept pages earmarked, by my bedside table. I poured over faces of women with carriages out walking on my neighborhood Upper West Side Streets. They all looked older. If they weren't nannies, friends, or grandmas, I would be all right.

To make this more vivid and palpable for us, one friend to whom I mentioned this quest directed me to a couple who had a two-and-a-half year old son they adopted in Chile as an infant. They invited us to bagels and coffee on a Sunday. We piled into their cozy and cluttered apartment overlooking the grounds of the Natural History Museum and we virtually sat there staring at them. They allowed themselves to be viewed as if they were an exhibit, taxidermied behind glass at the Museum across the street. Again as they shared their story, it came in and out of focus, we had so little common frame of reference to understand. We took out a pad and paper and wrote down the name of their adoption agency and the name of their social worker. What stood out in my mind about their social worker was the fact that she was legally blind. They seemed like a real, ordinary Upper West Side family, a little or a lot out of kilter with the rest of the country but perfectly normal against a standard with which we judged ourselves. They ate bagels, drank cappuccino, sat comfortably talking as their little guy hummed around his toys an array of things some educational, some found objects. He drank apple juice, his

nose ran, he didn't listen very much, and he referred to them as Mom and Dad. As our visit ended, I felt that the distance between our longing and that family scene seemed enormous and unbridgeable. I suddenly felt intensely that I didn't want to fill Frank with any of my misgivings about what a child could do to a relationship, (not wanting to discourage him). We walked off into the crisp Sunday early afternoon longing to have a child around us drinking juice and calling us Mom and Dad. This visit accelerated our pursuit and centered much of our conversation on the steps one needed to take to get such a child.

Soon after that, I found myself in the company of a news correspondent who was currently adopting a second child from Chile. I asked her how she went about it and she openly and unhesitatingly gave me the names and addresses of all her contacts. The name of the social worker who performed her home study was the very same woman who had worked with the family we had visited with at that Sunday brunch, the one who was legally blind. The correspondent also resided on the Upper West Side and seemed more or less to be like-minded soul. Our conversation encouraged me to take our first real step. To commence the process, I contacted the twice recommended social worker and made an appointment for what she called an adoption counselling session.

Driving out toward Hicksville, Long Island, to her home and office on a late Sunday morning I found myself filled with trepidation. Our ride out there was unusually still, immersed in reflection. She lived in a normal enough suburban home on a well groomed street and was there to meet us at the door as we drove up. It was in fact true, that she was indeed legally blind although she was well able to maneuver around her house without the aid of a dog or a cane. She escorted us up the stairs to her office, a former bedroom on the second floor. Immediately she told us about her two children one of whom was adopted and of mixed parentage from Vietnam. She was now widowed and she'd had a severe vision disability all the

time she was raising her children. All of this information we knew before we even sat down. My father's brother, my uncle, was blind and someone I always felt uneasy with as a child. He seemed to have frightening ways of seeing into people and situations. He lived alone between marriages (he had three of them) and he learned to cook, to dress himself, and to get to work with only the aid of a seeing eye dog, named Zenta. Leafing through an old National Geographic Magazine in the library as a child, I found a picture of him and Zenta at their graduation from Princeton University. He was the first blind person to graduate from College accompanied by a dog. My somewhat disconcerting experience with my sightless uncle added a level of tension to our meeting. I was expecting some sorcerer-like wrinkle to infiltrate our discussion.

The social worker began by asking us some direct questions like, how old are you both, do you have children of your own, why do you want to do this, does the kind, age, color, or sex, of the child you get matter? How much money do you have to spend on this? Are you married? This last question threw us. We had lived in a committed, monogamous relationship for nearly eight years and had not considered marriage on principle. But marriage, it seemed, was a requisite for adoption in most countries. Single women were able to adopt in those places more easily than unmarried couples. In fact, a couple, in most places, had to be married at least three years to be qualified, she added. The first stumbling block. Next she added that my age, forty seven, would barely be acceptable in most of the countries where babies were available. Fortunately, we were balanced by Frank's age, 39, although they generally preferred the mother to be younger. "They" seemed to be the regulating agency for adoption in most foreign countries. She seemed to be a compendium of adoption regulations country by country. Next she went on to delineate the different ways one could go about adopting a child.

It seemed you could go through agencies, but she quickly eliminated them

because we wouldn't fit most of their stringent qualifications; then there was the avenue of the entrepreneurial lawyer and what was called a domestic, private adoption where a phone was rigged up with a private line and ads were placed throughout rural America and a relationship was established long distance with a young pregnant girl who couldn't abide an abortion. If this young girl found you suitable, the lawyer would start the legal procedures in action. You could then either form an open relationship with the birth mother or receive the baby at birth having had nothing but phone contact with the mother. This, however, was often very expensive, the young woman could change her mind, even after you possessed the child, and some of the lawyers involved were unscrupulous and further it often took a good gift of conversation to keep the young woman involved, connected, and committed to you. As the social worker went into detail about this method of adoption, sprinkling it with colorful stories of some of the notorious and nefarious lawyers and legal practices involved, we found ourselves backing away without much discussion.

As we were about to conclude, defeated and upset, as if she were pulling a rabbit out of a hat, she seemed to light onto a lead that might work. A single, gay, social worker from Manhattan had gotten a beautiful baby with little difficulty through a lawyer with contacts in Paraguay. She gave us the name of the lawyer who resided in Miami, asked us if we had any other questions, said we should call if we had other things we wanted to know, charged us \$50.00 and sent us on our way. She was available for questions, but the next time we would see her, if we so chose, would be to perform that ominous sounding "home study".

We drove home staring out the window, saying little. I kept wishing that I could turn into a younger version of myself or find Frank someone young and fertile and be done with a situation increasingly filling our lives with upheaval and the potential for great disharmony, heartbreak, and endless nausea on my part. We

spent the rest of that Sunday reading the paper and did not refer to our visit.

Chapter 2

The next day at work sequestered by the phone I called the lawyer in Miami. She immediately came to the phone and in muted tones, so as not to be overheard, I told her my purpose in calling, who had referred us, and then began to answer her questions. Just healthy, was all I remember answering to her many queries. She listened and then said simply, "Let me send you the information you need to pursue an adoption." Indeed it was possible to get a baby with relatively little redtape, but we had to get married as quickly as possible. She believed that if we could prove we were married, the judge would take into consideration the fact that we had lived together harmoniously for seven years. The phone back in its cradle, I tried to concentrate at work, but I knew that a next step was to inform Frank that we had to get married and at that rather quickly if we were to raise a family.

Within days the information from the lawyer arrived in the mail. We began discussing marriage and once again, it fell to me to find out how one went about it. We must both have been in a daze the first time, because neither of us could remember getting marriage licenses or concomitant details. From photo albums, I knew that Frank had a very traditional wedding the first time, with nothing spared, and although mine was considerably simpler, it more than qualified as a proper wedding. Frank had married to a childhood friend. I had married a man I had known only three weeks prior to our wedding. Our differences as individuals could be foretold by those early choices.

Frank and I were firmly convinced that there would be no possibility of our adopting a child as a couple without a marriage license in hand. All this was happening almost obliquely. Each step Frank took was becoming a formal, long-term commitment to me. Acknowledging this, I became delirious and partially numb not wanting to recognize and accept the depth of feeling and responsibility

and love he had. My experience with love was bitter and my frightened, mistrustful heart didn't want to register and accept this undeniable reality. In an almost instrumental, doggedly businesslike way, I gathered the facts about marriage and wedding licenses, never admitting it was anything more than obligatory for our pursuit of a child, as if it were just one of those necessary evils one puts up with when the goal is greater than the impediment.

This must have been the reason that I only passingly mentioned that I was getting married to Jeremy and Rebecca, my two grown children. Their lives needn't be disrupted, or they dislodged, because Momma had to get a marriage license to adopt a child. Both children had been fully apprised of the impending adoption and had been warm and excited about the possibility. They were both in their twenties at this time and had often expressed a desire for me to be secure and happy. My logic lapsed, my access to inner truths paled. For not only did we not marry at City Hall stealing strangers off the steps at lunch hour for witnesses, but we had a formal, sedate and very ceremonious service in a delicate and beautiful chapel at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, one of the largest and most grand structures of its kind in the Western world. Further, we had to go through a series of extensive and probing pre-marital counselling sessions with a parish priest and receive permission from the Bishop to marry there. I doffed off questions about the children at these sessions like powdery snow alluding lightly to their full and complete support. There would be no way of knowing, pre-determining that they would not be at the wedding. For the wily priest/counselor would have unearthed and probed this.

With the help of a friend, I bought a lovely green and blue silk outfit over which I wore a purple kimona and sash. The invitations were all written fastidiously by hand. And everyone close to us including immediate family were invited. That is all but my two children who were kept informed about the

impending wedding but were in fact never formally invited. Even today, I'm not sure why. My father's viola circled the ceremony like warm birth fluid as a small number of family and friends gathered about us. As the priest raised our hands up together, at the conclusion of the service, a beam of sun poured through the rose window and lit up the assembled friends. We then streamed through the neighboring streets as we walked ensemble to the reception at a friend's house. Steak, asparagus, fresh strawberries, imported French white wine, and a home baked carrot cake were shared while a young friend played the fiddle. It was duly ceremonious and tasteful and there was no doubt that it was a real wedding and reception. "How but in custom and ceremony, Are beauty and innocence born?" Yeats wrote. How could I not have insisted that Jeremy and Rebecca share this day with me? So much of this resonated with authenticity and truth. This was a sordid and unseemly lapse. My purposes and my delight were not rectified. Could I perhaps have been yet be unable to reconcile my ambivalence about the coexistence of children and romance?

Within weeks of settling in as husband and wife, than the phone rang at about eleven o'clock one Friday night. It was the Miami lawyer who said, "How would you like to have an eighteen-month-old baby boy? He is available immediately, in Asuncion, Paraguay." Apparently, his mother who had kept him solidly by her side since infancy, had left him and fled the border to increase her earning capacity. With a deceptive evenness, I informed her that we had, indeed, gotten married and that I had begun to complete the forms necessary for an adoption. She said that she would send us some photographs of the little boy Federal Express along with the particulars about his size, weight, and height. She said that he was currently in residence with the lawyer who was to represent him in the adoption process. Within six to eight weeks, if we worked with her, we could fly down to Paraguay to adopt him. With that she hung up.

Dissolved in tears, I tried to explain to Frank what had just happened. I felt immediately transformed, as if I could feel the little person by my side. Already I wondered if he was okay, being well taken care of. A heaviness welled up at the thought of this little child so harshly abandoned by his mother. Six weeks seemed too long to have to wait to get him. "I am a mother again," I kept saying over and over. Frank was becoming increasingly impatient and tense. While I was weeping and pining for my abandoned child, he was trying to elicit some information and put some reason and shape into the content of the recent call.

It was admittedly hard to grasp on a random Friday evening, that out of nowhere we suddenly had an excellent and real prospect of becoming parents. Suddenly I became swollen and overcome by a penetrating urge to nurture. I was like a blossom suddenly popped open. I could feel the touch of a small hand and the breath of a young mouth against my cheek. Twenty years had evaporated with this promise. Frank having no parental touchstones was attempting to grasp the information by getting grounded with facts and details. Needless to say neither of us got much sleep. I with a pain of longing to be with the little child, and Frank who kept asking me what did I remember about Paraguay from school, and to repeat in detail about the phone conversation and what was going to happen next.

The next morning found us in the bookstore looking for information about Paraguay. Except for a couple of pages in some Latin American tourist guides, there was little available. We got an atlas down from a shelf and located a detailed map of Latin America and found the small, land-locked country sharing borders with Chile, Bolivia, Brazil and Argentina. Frank remembered disjointedly that it was run by a dictator named Stroessner and that every deposed and disreputable leader in the world had been given sanctuary there. And that lots of Nazis and S.S Officers reputedly were housed comfortably, yes, even welcomed there. More reason and urgency to get the little fellow out, was my reaction to this information.

Sure enough, within hours we were holding pictures of the child. In the pictures, he was nestled between a woman and a little girl whom we later learned were the nanny and the lawyer's, daughter. He was beautifully and very boyishly dressed, had fair skin, blondish hair, and his ears poked out from his head a little bit. Upon sight, my heart melted, I could barely wait for the time when I could hold him and he would be ours. Frank, without saying much, kept picking up the photos, looking at them, and putting them down. I had learned by now not to move in on him and invade his process of coming to terms with things. Little was said as we both, in our own ways, tried to absorb the situation and formulate our thoughts and ultimately our actions concerning the next step.

Although I had no doubt about wanting this child, I used inordinate self-control not to impose my feelings on Frank. A most important ray of information about myself and another demonstration that I had indeed learned, gratefully, that I needn't amass or control a situation for it to come out right. That I had learned to trust our collectivity to make the right choice and that I needn't compress time to have answers come sooner than they were ready.

I had come to think through arduous self-scrutiny, that women were enslaved by having to allure and manipulate, to outfox, to lay submissive, a pretend game while shaping a reality as one does clay, forcing a fit heated not by providence but by intense desire. That women were oppressed by their need to please and capture and that on some level they really wished their vaginas could enclose and hold a man like a fly trap. That this was arcane, humiliating, debilitating, not forthright, and as the rhetoric asked for equal and balanced power and authority so had the games of cunning to stop. And further that women were encumbered by a form of child-like magical thinking in which they believed that things would ultimately come out their way if they wished hard enough and did a little entrapping and rearranging. I had worked hard to discard and dispel all of this and,

I came to see through this trying process that I had indeed allowed myself to grow, and had gone beyond needing to blame. "Attracted more to abandonment than love," I had once written about myself. Endings for many years were my business. Here I was on the cusp of a patience I had wanted and cultivated, and I could now let things unfold and accept endings as they happened. That the action was in the act, the struggle. That was the purpose, that my desire.

Glazed by insights and self-truths, my thoughts harbored the child on the couch housed with a nanny and a lawyer trying to grasp that he would never again see or hear from his mother. This little person, one in whom a future adult was recognizable, was a person old enough to feel the pain of his abandonment and to suffer as a result of it, a person who could be scarred, and certainly shaped, in some way by this inconceivable act. These thoughts were among the exchanges between friends and family as we opened ourselves to our community of the entrusted to help us bring the right decision to light. We would sit together with these friends and confidants passing the photos around and listening as they reacted. As these pre-arranged discussions ensued, I put on hold a little sailor suit in the local children's store, and I would ask every other mother on the street, "How old is your child?" This to recapture the nature and dimensions of an eighteen month old. It came to me intermittently that this child who was already tucked next to me as I slept at night, might ultimately turn out not to be mine. Central to all of these laborious and lengthy discussions was the possible impact and extent of his hurt and how it could infringe on our ability to parent him. The scar tissue was already there and we had to consider our capacity and our resources for dealing with this. This also would foreclose on our opportunity to raise someone from the beginning, to finding an infant pure and untouched by abandonment as a direct experience, having only to explain separation at birth as a basic life truth. I sat for the most part and talking and listening, not wanting to betray my heart fastened inextricably to

this child. I recognized that two of us had to live with this decision and that two of us therefore had to make it.

The lawyer from Miami kept calling every few days to see how we were doing with our deliberations. She understood that we needed time, but also said that if we didn't want the child that she would have to find another suitable family. Meanwhile, I was diligently preparing all of the copious paper work. Finally, the lawyer gave us a deadline and said she had to know, because the lawyer in Paraguay with whom he was living was getting increasingly impatient. The major thrust of our deliberations settled on the fact that this little child was already eighteen months old. Frank wanted to raise a child from birth. Caught up in this dilemma, we decided to make an appointment to meet with the pediatrician I used with Jeremy and Rebecca. She had been the physician with a large adoption agency and we felt perhaps she could give us some insight. We showed her the pictures of the child, there was not a soul who did not find him appealing, and raised with her our concern about his age, the trauma of his abandonment, and whether it would not be better to try to get a new born. She said simply, that in adoption agencies it was standard practice for prospective parents to be given an opportunity to meet the child prior to arranging for the adoption and that perhaps we ought to think about going to Paraguay and visiting with the child. Expense aside, this seemed like a wonderful and well- reasoned idea to us.

I called the lawyer in Miami and asked her if this would not be possible. Well, she said, she had never heard of such a thing and did not believe in "baby shopping" but in this case she understood. I then asked, somewhat hesitantly, not wanting to be judged poorly by our indecisiveness and our need to chose between human lives and their fates, that if we felt we would rather have an infant, would it be possible. Yes, she answered. As a matter of fact, she knew of a infant boy, three weeks old who was up for adoption and if we didn't want the little boy, we would be

offered the chance to adopt this baby. Among other things, she was a shrewd businesswoman. There was no doubt in her mind that we were going to conclude our business with her with a child in hand.

Coincidentally, she was going to be in Paraguay the next week and we could arrange to meet her there. Whether this was by chance or by cunning we didn't even question. Frank would make the trip alone, aside from the expense for both of us to go, it became an undiscussed imperative that he be the one to see the child and decide. In this case he be the parent giving birth, extending out the first hand, laying on the first gaze, his was the heart that would be touched first. I had had that experience with Jeremy and Rebecca. We both knew that I had been mothering the little child since the phone call that night. Arrangements were made through the lawyer's travel agent in one day. With the clarity and power embraced in our wedding vows, we agreed that whatever choice Frank made, would be as if made by both of us.

Chapter 3

Frank was met at the airport in Asuncion, by a female lawyer, one of the partners representing the child. Frank settled into the Hotel Cecilia, the Hotel recommended by the lawyer in Miami the same one where she was staying. He had with him a Berlitz Spanish translation/travel guide and a book entitled, "Your One Year Old," we had purchased the night before. We promised to be in nearly constant contact. The next morning the lawyer arranged to pick up Frank and to bring him to her home where he would meet the child.

On schedule the lawyer came for Frank to drive him to her home. As Frank entered the room familiar because of the photographs, the lawyer called out to a small child with an expectant, clean face and two wondrous, glistening eyes, "Poppy has arrived". To which Frank heatedly, and emphatically responded, "I am not Poppy!" We had thought we had made it very clear that Frank was coming to see the child and to see if he was someone that he could easily and comfortably father, without making any firm commitment to adopt him. Thrown by the tension in these early introductions both Frank and the child recoiled. The little boy nestling into the arm-wing of the nanny. Frank's initial, nearly involuntary, response began to resound with the possibility of yet another rejection for the child. Quick and ominous gazes were exchanged between the nanny and the lawyer who abruptly and perfunctorily concluded the visit seemingly to protect the child. On the return trip to the hotel the lawyer arranged for Frank to play with the little boy the next day in the nursery at the hotel. I was nearly mute as Frank told me this on the phone.

At ten the next morning, the lawyer, the nanny, and the little boy arrived. The lawyer commenced the visit by issuing the following ultimatum: at twelve noon, the conclusion of the visit, Frank would have to say whether or not he wanted to adopt the child. This was firm and non-negotiable. With this edict

beating in his ears, Frank, chaperoned by the nanny, began to play with the little boy. Frank had devised a series of age-appropriate games he had culled from reading the book about one year olds, having so little firsthand experience with small children. Frank found the little boy to be lively, inquisitive and quite adept at playing all the games he initiated. He seemed to be well coordinated and to follow instructions easily. He had very bright eyes and a sweet responsive disposition. While Frank played with him, the nanny sat in the corner, her eyes fixed on them. The little boy repeatedly looked toward her, apparently very connected and attached to her. She seemed both exceedingly protective of the child and disdainful of Frank and the entire decision making process.

At precisely twelve noon, the lawyer reappeared and asked, "Well, do you want him?" To which Frank responded, "I believe I do but I would like the opportunity to confer with my wife. I can have a definitive answer for you by mid-afternoon." To this the lawyer said emotionally, "No, you may not have him. You must love a child at first sight and be willing to die for him. You have no more time to decide. I will not let you have him. Never!" With that the child disappeared in the arms of the nanny with the adoption process nullified.

Stunned and disbelieving, Frank was then called upon to comfort the child's lawyer who broke into deep, thick sobs. Soon they were joined by the lawyer from Miami who, hearing the news, also started to cry. Frank, who apparently had just had fatherhood abruptly snatched from him, now had to contend with a chorus of female lawyers bereft at the loss of yet a second home for the child. Finally extricating himself from this situation, Frank found his way to a phone, to fill me in on the events that had just transpired. He was feeling numbed and shattered and emptied of any energy. I tried to listen in a calm and deliberate manner concealing the pain which was erupting within. Static-like spasms of grief wreathed me as I listened. I believed that this ultimatum had been issued in the heat of the moment

or in the theatrics of clever business practice and could be reversed. We decided to sleep on this Solomon like predicament and upon waking in the morning identify our very first instinct, the first raw thought we drew concerning our desire for this child. If we both woke up yearning for him, Frank would go to the lawyer to attempt to reverse the decision. In our hearts we did not believe he was lost to us. Both of us found we wakened wanting him.

Frank went and contacted the lawyer who again reiterated emphatically that the decision was immutable, irreversible, non-negotiable, and final. The lawyer did not think Frank was caring enough, that his feelings were sufficiently accessible. The fact that Frank had not come rushing into the room at that first visit and upon seeing the little boy scooping him up into his arms while crying out emotionally and passionately, "My son, my son," had soured the deal from the first. We will never know the truth here: whether we had a terrible culture clash, a miscommunication, had been set up, or she had decided to keep the child, or even, that she'd made another more lucrative arrangement for him. Only photos filed somewhere with our initial adoption papers attest to his existence. It was hard to know what Frank was feeling at this precise moment. I encouraged him, according to plan, to find the lawyer from Miami and pursue the opportunity to spend time with the infant who was located some distance from Asuncion.

True to her word, the lawyer arranged for Frank to go to Stroessner, some five hours by bus from Asuncion, to meet the second baby. Frank agreed and I wished him luck and assured him of my continued confidence in the plan we had made. As if holding the memory of a still born in my arms, I was caught up in feelings of profound mourning. The little boy whom I had mentally enrolled in a nursery school for the fall would not be joining our family. What kind of a death was this? What kind of an expectation shattered? What possibility eclipsed? Deep in these questions a weltering configuration of an ending folded over me.

Through the back roads of Paraguay, through the night, Frank travelled. (People reputedly disappeared from these bus rides never to be seen again.) As dawn broke, he was met at the bus by the Director of the Local Social Service Agency, also a lawyer, who invited him into her car and escorted him over primarily unpaved roads to a small and simple house on a back street in this remote town. Leaving Frank in the car, she went inside the house and returned moments later with a tiny infant, three weeks old, wrapped tightly in a blanket. She handed the infant to Frank and took off for a seedy, sort of grade B hotel in the center of town. She deposited both of them in a dimly lit room, one bare bulb dangling, and said she would return in a couple of hours.

Frank cradled the baby, fed him a bottle, tried to unravel the bunting to get a better look, got down to the diaper, but without a change left it on. He held him and talked to him while his heart attached itself to him. Hours later the baby was returned to the simple house, and Frank and the lawyer joined by her sister toured the area. A meal shared, they placed Frank back on the bus to return by midnight to Asuncion, a full twenty-four hours later, and to the Hotel Cecilia. All discussion had taken place through the swapping back and forth of Frank's Berlitz Spanish language travel dictionary.

At the same time, I had driven to the country home of our very close friends and the intended god-parents of our new child. It was July third. I had arrived sobbing and spasmodically filled them in on the story of the little boy now lost to us. They, too, had seen his picture and were preparing to become his godparents. Getting their sadness in grip and without dwelling on the unfathomable details, they immediately shifted their dislocation to empathetic feelings for Frank. None of us could quite approximate what the experience for him had been like as we talked through the afternoon and evening. Unspoken of and looming was the testimony from the next part of the journey. As dawn lifted, I tried to call Frank, but couldn't.

I wandered out back in the dewy grass promising to retain my equanimity no matter what had transpired and my pact with Frank to support whatever decisions he was to make. At seven, I tried again, and this time they connected me to Frank's room. A very tired and drained voice answered, "Naomi?" I whispered, "Yes." "Naomi, I found my son and I love him!" he said. A shiver sliced down my spine. I with those words had become a mother again. Frank then recounted the entire saga to me in vivid detail. Ending by informing me that the movie "The Mission" which we had yet to see was filmed where our little son had been born and that he was a composition of Guarini Indian, the Indians native to that area, and something else. This bit of information had been shared with him by the lawyer from Miami who had met him at the bus upon his return. Since it was July 4th, Frank thought he would spend the day around the United States Embassy. We promised to talk later and with more reserve than usual bid goodbye.

In the evening the sky lit up. Never had a fourth of July been as noisy and brilliant. The explosions of fireworks tincturing the sky with an array of rousing colors seemed to be announcing our connection to this child. For the third time, I was going to be a Mother. Somewhere, off somewhere, in a place I could barely imagine lay a tiny baby, a small person, who was now waiting for us to come and collect him. Again and again, I was struck by the fact that I had just given birth or a birth had been given to me. I tried to let this reality seep into my being, my brain. My heart felt like stretched canvas, its palpitations electrical eruptions. I felt an inextricable connection through space and time to this baby and could nearly feel him curled and breathing softly in my arms. My breasts swelled as if they were once again building milk. My stomach soft with a sacred reminiscence.

Decisions were actions. For the most part, there were no right or wrong decisions. Decisions were facts. Inherent in how one lay the story, the dilemma, the doubt, the confusion. Our weakness or strength was in the range we walked to

become purposeful and decisive. There was no turning back. I just had to wait for Frank's return and to continue the arduous and fastidiously detailed job of completing the endless array of forms that accompany a birth by adoption.

The night before Frank's return, I found myself at Gabriel's wake. Gabriel was four-months-old when he died from that mysterious ailment called "Sudden Infant Death Syndrome". Gabriel's mother was a friend of mine from work. Gabriel had been in the office just the Friday before his death - bouncing, plump, and lively in a little N.Y. Mets outfit. Sitting in a room in a small funeral parlor in the Bronx, surrounded by Gabriel's family, I found myself drenched in a kind of despair. It was hard to look at the raw, exposed emotion on the faces of Gabriel's parents. Was there a grief greater than this? And I was within weeks about to embrace another child. What stamina, what nerve did it take to once again be in a position where one had to be so courageously and tenaciously poised on that fragile and yawning abyss - the one which vultures circle - where death always seemed eminent, in spite of the fact that we were told babies were sturdy and resilient. When else were we called to assume responsibility for life so unable to represent itself, and in which every breath held a message to decode? Could I bare up, live with vigor and a kind of optimism knowing that in those early months and years of a child's life my hands, no longer god's alone, were the one's to lay on? As I sat there in the shadows of this vigil, I became fully and presently aware of what I was bringing on by welcoming Luca into our lives. Whatever meaning Gabriel's parents would find from his brief life and death, he had given me a great deal. After clasping my friend and her husband with the weight of the emotion I was feeling, I walked back out into the summer night.

The next day Frank would be returning from Paraguay, but I would be meeting Jeremy, as pre-arranged, who was returning at almost the same time after his graduation from Cambridge University in England. The pink was just pulling

off the horizon, the air mostly dark as I arrived at the harbor. The Queen Elizabeth the Second was anchoring. It would be hours before anyone disembarked. I did not want to impede Jeremy's return home with stories of his new brother. I wanted his homecoming to be a singular event. I had not gone to his graduation because we had all felt that having both parents there would be hard. I began to doubt the wisdom of that choice. It smacked of old behavior when I would rather defer than confront, disappear instead of making a demand. I wandered back and forth grateful for the time to compose myself and become reoriented. I kept looking into the windows of the opulent dining areas but could not find Jeremy. Then as if something out of "Chariots of Fire" I looked to the top of the ship and there was Jeremy in round tortoise shell glasses, khakis, a blue blazer and his Cambridge blue basketball scarf flung casually around his neck and shoulders, resting on the arm of the deck gazing out to sea. Jeremy's education there had been triumphant. How did one adequately describe a mother's feelings watching someone once such a part of herself return, quite dazzling, knowing deep in her heart that he would never again be coming fully home? We made contact, waved easily, I had learned to do that with him, intensity of emotion or great demonstrativeness only drove him away. Finally on land, we packed up the car, with three years of his belongings, and headed up the West Side Highway home. I said simply that Frank would be home soon from Paraguay.

Reunited as a family, everyone was flushed with excitement and sentiment. The dog, Kira, leaped from one lap to the other. We all caught up helter-skelter. Rebecca had just returned from her first year at Colorado College and was in the flush of great happiness and enthusiasm. Like rubbings in the fabric of relationships between parents and child, there was never an opportunity lost to be explicit about the establishment of a newly acquired status on another frontier. I had suffered through the stings of these declarations of separateness and learned to acknowledge

them but not to overreact, the concomitant panic just beneath the surface was still largely unchecked and needed all my reserve and self- control.

The story of the baby was recounted without much fuss or pageantry. Both the children seemed delighted but needed to protect their emerging selves. We did however engage the entire family in the naming of the baby. We went through the names in an old baby name book we had around the house. Both Rebecca and Jeremy wanted to name a son of their own Alexander, but generously offered it as a possibility. Suddenly as if thunder blurted out of the sky, Frank said " Luca". Luca. And it seemed right. On a trip to Italy the summer before, we had the opportunity to visit the jewel-like Cathedral in Orvieto. In one of the chapels, there were the frescoes of Luca Signorelli. We had been encouraged to see them by the baby's intended god- mother, an art historian and painter, and had gratefully followed her lead. These frescoes engulfed us with their terrifying depiction of heaven and hell. By the end of the day, the work of this is early Renaissance painter, who had been a great influence on Michaelangelo, had become engraved in us. To each of us he seemed to be a Luca as we passed around the dimly reproduced polaroid photos Frank had taken of him. However, not wanting him to appear too different and perhaps too outside the undefinable but recognizable world of the norm we added the name Alexander. Luca Alexander Pignatelli he became. That baby somewhere, hopefully in someone's arms, so far off had just received an official and exceedingly wonderful and important name.

Luca was almost lost to us in a flurry of scandal. Our Paraguayan lawyer, also the Director of Social Services, was in danger of being caught in the middle of her own double-dealing. She could go no further processing our papers without endangering her job or perhaps winding up in jail. It was illegal to represent a child up for adoption while being in charge of the agency needed to sanction the adoption. She had our \$3,000 fee in hand before she abandoned our case leaving our

incomplete papers to languish in the local courthouse. There we were with so many forms rich with details of our lives in Spanish and in English left to gather dust, jeopardizing our connection to Luca which was becoming increasingly tenuous, unravelling. This infant with our name was being separated from us even as he lay in some primitive cradle at the edge of a distant rain forest.

According to an extravagantly detailed letter from our Miami lawyer, Paraguay was writhing in the throes of inflammatory rumors in which babies were being brought to the United States and used for medical experiments or vital organ transplants, while other infants were being kidnapped and transported across the Brazilian border, waiting warehoused to be sold on the black-market. We were further informed that Luca had been moved rapidly and mysteriously at night from the simple cottage of the foster nanny caring for him into a government controlled and operated Casa Cuna or infant hospital. A local judge had actually transferred Luca in his own arms at the request of the foster nanny, who was also coincidentally the sister of the Director of Social Service, our then lawyer. This infant child, barely four weeks old, was being shunted about obviously by people who had some sense of responsibility for his destiny and well-being, and not merely because they had been given a \$3,000 fee. The lawyer in Miami recanting this gothic tale was in her way acclimating us to the culture of treachery and absolute arbitrariness which housed and gave birth to our tiny son. We had become dependent, nearly enslaved, and almost accustomed to the wiliness and mercurial nature of our Miami based lawyer. We believed that she was reliable and steadfast because of our earlier experiences with her. And that it rested with us to be able to cope with and forestand the problematic nature of this thing called adoption in order to achieve our prepossessing goal and sole preoccupation - to bring Luca home safely and legally. She had made it clear to us that without an officially recognized Paraguayan lawyer to represent us in Court we would have no chance of formally adopting

Luca.

We were now being asked in the haste of the moment, forthwith, to transfer the power-of-attorney from the lawyer who had removed herself from the case to a lawyer who resided in the capitol, Asuncion. Without question or hesitation, we got the papers signed, notarized and shipped Federal Express within an hour of their receipt. We were living in an orbit of absolute trust, an unquestioned imperative. The sparseness of our conversation belied the upheavals we were each experiencing and the unbearable impatience we felt to have our son tucked between us. If we were not yet perfectly ready to die for Luca, as had been the condition of the lawyer representing the first little boy, we were in fact willing to surrender ourselves as one is called to do when experiencing an ecstatic love. We were caught up in our totality by our role as parents. We became obsessively protective of an infant held by Frank, for barely two hours in some remote part of the world now waiting for us to claim him. Filled so soon with feelings of near rupture, living cataclysmically with incessant forebodings of danger and the unpredictable for our baby so dependent and vulnerable, innocent of the impending disaster and doom. We felt his resilience and buoyancy, trusting us not to give in to the torment of a situation for the moment beyond our real comprehension or direct control. These kinds of feelings were, I knew, part of the darker side, the underbelly, the unavoidable undercurrent endemic in the nature of parental love. Reactivated in me the pitch of discomfort flapping about inside like a trapped wild bird.

Chapter 4

Caught up once again, I who knew the finiteness of love between a man and a woman, and the irrevocability and tyranny of the love of parent for child had again entered the circle although I had yet to hold this baby a fixture to my anguished and impatient flesh. The next weeks were filled with preparations. The lawyer had sent us a detailed list of items to bring with us when we fetched our child. We methodically checked the items off from diapers to hot plates on which to boil water, as we stacked them preparing for our departure. The papers had all been completed and were now waiting to be approved by the United States Department of Immigration. An autonomous and independent federal agency responsive to nothing less than congressional prodding. Our own local congressman had to intervene near the end to hasten the process, our papers gathering dust on someone's desk. Jeremy, a personal aid to a congressman in Washington and Frank were assigned to that front while Rebecca, remaining home during her summer vacation from college was busy with me assembling the extensive list of goods.

Twenty years had changed the nature of baby products. They were now more stream-lined, functional, and expensive. Cherished was the harmony, Rebecca and I were experiencing, as we shopped for the baby. The tables were turned as now at twenty she was the assertive and directed one. A little self-conscious and uncertain, she presented me multiple items, scouting out stretchies, and sweaters, and undershirts, and receiving blankets encouraging me to make the final choice. Much as I had done when I shopped with her over the years, bringing her what I believed were her current heart's desires, and getting her then to make the final selection.

We began these shopping jaunts at a very early age. I was often struck by her choices, indomitable and ultimately responsible should the references border on the menacing or destructive. I did not want to tamper with her increasing self-

definition, a thing I promised to myself to incubate and help grow. Mine was a childhood of intimidation if I was to deviate from a thing thought right and good for me by my mother who loomed an awesome presence of absolute judgements about things like clothes and shoes and coats and hairstyles. I had abandoned that way of mothering in the absolute. Now I was being treated to a dose of myself and I liked it. These were times of intense, opulent emotions on all our parts. The omnipresence of good will and openness was, we believed without verbalizing it explicitly, an airborne stream of protectiveness and love for the newest member of our family.

Participating side-by-side with us in these preparations for Luca were our next-door neighbors a devoted gay couple of twenty years. Increasingly they were becoming like extended family referring to themselves as grandfathers. The excitement and anticipation gathered momentum as the time for our departure became eminent. Prodded by Jeremy and Frank's persistent interventions, the papers had finally been released from the Department of Immigration and were on their way to the courthouse in Stroessner, Paraguay. Rebecca and I in a last minute indulgence splurged on a Parisian infant outfit. As was our habit, we always left a store with something unnecessary but particularly desirable, and this time it was for Luca. The feeling of connectedness we experienced as we held up the little suit was transcendent.

Both Frank's parents and my own played very minor roles in this time of preparation. My parents at this point of their lives, both in their seventies, were involved in a series of activities from which they could not easily be drawn. They had always both been strongly connected to Jeremy and Rebecca and had played active roles in their lives. Undeniable feelings of misgiving or disapproval on their parts about the adoption were kept in check which for them was using a strong sense of exertion and control. Since my divorce they had learned to hold their

tongues or risk the open expression of my wrath which had come with my new found freedom. My mother an avid reader of current novels, the Sunday Times Book Review, and the New Yorker could not resist clipping and forwarding, as has been a lifelong avocation of hers, articles about similar situations with a heavy bias toward the negative. Not ever difficult to decode, it was her way of expressing opinions once removed.

Frank's parents were from the first delighted and excited about the prospect of a grandson, having already a grand-daughter who was a year old. They assumed a posture of quiet support having already been caught up in the tentativeness and confusion of this process. For a time they too had been expecting to grandparent the little eighteen month old boy. Once again I was taken with their ability to give Frank and now me the room to maneuver without having to incessantly report or reassure them. They were always eager to listen, ready with an opinion if asked, but able to exert self-restraint respecting our current need for very focused autonomy. Never once was there even the slightest hint of disappointment that their first and perhaps only grandson would not be of their blood. Somehow, somewhere they were able to obliterate or eliminate all of those strong ancient familial feelings that Italians tend to have about blood lines to make a place of honor almost thicker than blood to their soon to arrive new grandson. My mother-in-law quickly handed me a vivid blue baby diaper bag lined with plastic with areas to carry bottles, diapers, stretchies etc. at final visit before our departure. She had deferred her own pleasure for participating in the preparation for Luca's arrival although she is a woman whose life is circumscribed in many ways by such events like births, showers, weddings, anniversaries, personal landmarks. She had demonstrated great sensitivity and restraint by allowing Rebecca and me to get ready for Luca's arrival without encumbrances.

I kept at bay recurring feelings of discomfort at what she must at times think

or feel because of Frank and my age difference and the fact that I had two grown children and was now unable to reproduce was about to adopt a third. I overheard her saying to Frank at one point, "Naomi must love you a great deal to be doing this." Frank had not responded. (Need, love, want more children, would have adopted a child if I hadn't married again, could have made innumerable other choices, all of this being academic, for the most part unknowable, and presently irrelevant - who ever really can know a motive - more than a swirl of surfacing unconscious thoughts and disassembled pieces of dreams?)

She asked me, (she being a young girl with whom I had worked from the time she was 11 until the present, now 19) at one of our frequent hamburger lunches at a neighboring Greek restaurant, "What would happen if Frank left you - if your marriage broke up?" Then, then would I want to be tied down with a child? I knew marriages broke up. I knew I was taunting the fates marrying a man so much younger and so obviously attractive. I knew how lonely one could be lying next to a man in a marriage bed.

The fist of loneliness

Thumb-bent in an infant twist

The gist, the grist, the grizzly, growly,
growing fact

A marriage is no pact against solitude,

I still weep lonely and alone

Next to him in bed in our room.

I had written, sadly, somewhere in the middle of my first marriage. What now was, in truth, driving me on? "Are you getting the baby to hold onto Frank?" My young friend pursued her line of questioning. Had I resorted or returned to the adolescent, to paradoxical magical thinking? If I had remained single would I still be doing this? Did this decision to adopt a child have its basis in reasoned choice? If

suddenly I found myself single again would I want to be connected to and responsible for a growing child? Yes, a resounding yes! Whatever other motivation there was, or impetus for this choice, I knew I wanted always to have someone young to care for and to think about. I wanted the world opened for me anew. Only young surprised eyes could do that. I thanked my young friend for leading me through these hard questions. "Nothing different than what you've done with me before," she demurred.

Chapter 5

The day arrived when we finally headed off for the airport, luggage and umbrella stroller in tow. We were driven to the airport by our next door neighbors impatient too for the arrival of their new grandson. The first plane brought us to Miami a gateway to Latin America. There we found ourselves near midnight in the waiting arms of our Miami-based lawyer delighted to be seeing Frank once again and immediately familiar with me. Not only had she guided us through the rigors of this process but had stood by us through the confusion and turmoil about the little boy. Now as we were about to get Luca, she had the presence and stature of a guardian and godparent.

She took us for a drink at the Clipper Club where she was a member and after a deep and prophetic toast began to regale us with stories and details about our new lawyer who was apparently a good friend and soon to be the best man at her wedding to an Italian born Paraguayan. When she shared with us that she would soon be marrying a man of Italian origin, like Frank, it did not come as any great surprise. She could sell shoes to a snake Frank had commented once offhandedly. She used as a mode of operation, we had come to know, anything at hand to bridge or strengthen her relationship to us, and to foster a need of and reliance on her. We too needed a handle on things to operate optimally. Our relationship with the lawyer was by now one of insight and mutually agreed to unquestioned trust and cooperation. The fact was we all understood each other well. She went on that our new lawyer had at the last minute aware of our crisis and the fact that we were in danger of losing Luca, taken us on as clients as a special favor to her. Already in a matter of days, he had been to the courthouse to complete the papers left there by the our first lawyer and to check on Luca to see if he was alright. This in itself attested to his professional character, for the baby and the papers were in Stroessner

a hard five hour distance from Asuncion where he was based. This lawyer knew his way around the system and would never run out on us. The lawyer from Miami said this so emphatically and unequivocally that we shuddered from the tenor of these words. Midnight and it was time to go. Escorted to the point of embarkation, she said to call if anything went wrong and that she would keep posted of our progress through close contact with our lawyer.

As the clock struck twelve, Air Paraguay shuttled down the runway, lifting off for the eight hour flight to Paraguay. Our demeanor in the plane was reminiscent of our voyages to and from doctors, social workers, notaries, government officials, and all the complement of experts who had filled our lives on our course to adopt a child. A silence which spoke of so much settled over us as we flew through the darkened clouds of night to this land-locked country near the tip of Latin America. Sunday morning, and right on schedule, at eight, we landed in Asuncion, the Capitol of Paraguay. Frank having recently been there was able to negotiate the unfamiliarity of the airport with certain if stiff ease. As we stood in line waiting to be approved of and stamped in by the local immigration officials, we were grabbed by the shoulders by a man who said, "Pignatelli? I ham your lawyer!" With that he guided us swiftly and directly to the front of the line, no one raised their eyes or protested, as he handed us over to an official whom without looking up stamped our passports and waved us through. Propelled by him, we moved off to get our luggage which he hoisted on his shoulders as did another man who seemed to be accompanying him.

Obediently we followed him as he signalled us onward to a parking area where he stopped in front of a red Chevette compact. He stuffed our possessions into the trunk and pointing to the back seat ushered us into the car which rapidly took off. Through the man with him, whom we learned was the translator, we were told we were heading toward Asuncion and the Hotel Cecilia in which Frank

had been in residence a mere six weeks before. Frank had only peripherally shared details about the Hotel with me during that upsetting experience. I did know that it was comfortable and nice but was taken aback by its elegance and refinement as we approached its curved driveway and were drawn out by attendants in perfectly groomed uniform.

I felt I had just entered a quaint hotel in Munich, like one in which I had stayed more than twenty years before. I was aghast and unsettled as I stood by the reception desk while the lawyer registered us. Tapping immediately into a usually and intentionally dormant identification with Judaism, I felt this perfectly recreated setting held an allure and a potential danger. Instantly through time I was back wondering how such comfort and exquisite taste had risen so quickly and flawlessly out of ashes. Where had the hotelier been, was this a frieze, a set, something carted off and put into storage, artificially preserved as a war not quite fifty years ago had ripped through the country in which mass murder was made into an art form? Where were all these Germans then who were now so quickly fat and prosperous lounging about a exquisitely appointed lobby? This was not a Latin America I had imagined in my mind.

Although we had made a reservation, the lawyer seemed to be negotiating for another room arrangement for us giving me the opportunity to cast an in depth if discrete examination of the lobby. The appointments were fastidious, flowers in oriental vases, floral chintz on couches, satin-stripped wing-back chairs, paintings of country horse scenes and polo games on the walls, delicate mahogany coffee end tables with pewter lamps filled the airy and spacious rooms. Where were the rich primary colors, primitive furniture and with handwoven throws? This place had the uncanny presence of the old world airlifted through time and space. My feelings of dislocation and *deja vu* intensified as I stood there taking this all in. Finally we were asked to sign some familiar hotel registration forms, although in Spanish, we

were beckoned on. We followed the lawyer and the man with him into the elevator and to the door of our room which lead us into an elegantly appointed suite with French windows. The lawyer seemed pleased to have gotten us such a lovely space. Putting our things down in the room with a double bed, he led us to the opened windows and pointed out downtown Asuncion, a winding river, and at its banks Argentina.

Again he gestured inviting us to sit with him in the reception area where there was a small refrigerator on top of which were a dozen small bottles of liquor and some delicately wrapped boxes of chocolates. He opened the refrigerator and helped himself and us to some nicely chilled bottles of beer. Calling for room service he ordered us some sandwiches with luncheon meats. This was the first time we had had an opportunity to sit face to face and take each other in. Devoid of protocol or civility our exchanges were bare and probing. Gravely he began to unfold through the translator a situation not merely complex but perhaps hazardous. Because of his swift action and intervention, he knew that the baby was safe and that our papers were secured and in order at the court house. The adoption had to take place in the City of Stroessner such a distance away because that was the part of Paraguay which had the legal responsibility for our intended child. He then went on to recount with great flourish and detail the atmosphere surrounding adoption. His story corroborated with what the lawyer in Miami had described only now, here in this setting it began to gather a sense of authenticity. More than eight thousand miles from home in this company of strangers dawning the pervasive treachery of our simple and unquestioned desire to get our Luca. His stories resisted disbelief.

With each word we were becoming dependent on him in a way not familiar since childhood. He told us of a recent "night of siege" when doors had been kicked in by thick-booted police snatching babies awaiting adoption and returning them

either to their natural mothers or to other undisclosed locations. There was an added element of concern in our particular case because the baby's native town was so close to the Brazilian border and he was therefore suspect of being illegally brought into Paraguay to facilitate an easy and unbureaucratic adoption. (It took up to three years to adopt a baby in Brazil.) Already known as Luca Alexander Pignatelli, there was some concern that he could get caught up in the tangle of bootlegged Brazilian babies. As the lawyer went on with the help of the translator, who had not since we arrived moved far from his side, he grew rapidly in stature and dimension to nearly heroic proportion.

Some small person with our given name, lay in a creche in some strange, nether-world border town waiting to be claimed and we had to walk through the thicket of all this to get to him and to get us back home. Our fates rested squarely with the lawyer who was increasingly becoming like a cross between a warrior and a savior. The language barrier coupled with the terrifying stories with which we were being entreated gave me the opportunity to focus on their faces as a way of preserving and keeping in check surfacing overwrought and disruptive feelings. Antonio, as the lawyer had requested we call him, and Jorge the translator seemed to develop familiar personas. Antonio resembling Marlon Brando and Jorge, Jean Paul Belmondo. This was strange since neither actor was paramount in my mind and I was not prone to being stage struck. I couldn't remember ever being really infatuated with a movie star, drawn, but never even approaching the prelude of a fantasy. I had always been stuck on real men. What was heating this imaging? Did I scope out a daydream or fantasy to make this palatable? Had I already lost a presence and veered off to the edge of reality? Had an inexhausted fear surfaced in fancy and idolatry? Is this what the insane did with fright and pain? Had I reached over the boundary into passivity and calm?

These were not thoughts I immediately shared with Frank. He was I was sure

having his own dilemma and finding his own way to cope. Antonio concluded this curious monologue by informing us that our adoption was scheduled for two days hence, on Tuesday. An odd silence entered. The lawyer and translator much like old friends asked if we'd like to join them at a Sunday afternoon barbecue at the translator's house to honor his soccer team. We accepted the invitation knowing intuitively and without consultation that we could not again by more than moments away from the lawyer until we lifted off the ground and headed home with our infant Luca. Excusing ourselves for moments we quickly agreed to pay Antonio up front, to give him his \$3,000 immediately minus strings or questions. We knew we had to cement the relationship with some kind of gesture indicating our full and complete trust in him and his ability to navigate us through the murky and incomprehensible situation we now found ourselves in. Our relationship kept being confronted by our capacity to handle the unexpected and unpredictable with tenacity, humor, and faith. We walked through the door draining the last drops of beer out into a Sunday afternoon in Asuncion, Paraguay.

Climbing back into the little car, we raced off a blur of red in the quiet and warmth of mid-day. A few stray Indians sat sipping through crooked straws some native drink in the barren and ungreen dirtworn parks. Relinquishing any compulsion to garner the local facts and figures, the demographics, we were not tourists, we were parents coming to claim our child and to take him from here. None of the curiosity accompanying trips could be indulged, this was an inward journey and our guides were all the sight and sound we were to be allowed. Our communication would be rationed and programmed. We were actors on the sheets of legal briefs. I looked toward Frank and quickly he took on the presence of my father. I felt that I had known him always and with him would always be safe.

Frank also quickly and comfortable connected with Antonio and Jorge as they all admired everything female we came upon on the mostly barren streets. Shriill

calls and dirty laughter bellowed through the car. Females generally did not joke around like this, their looks and desires usually being more hidden. All this laughter and merriment abruptly stopped when we pulled up to what turned out to be Antonio's substantial white stucco townhouse. A blast on the horn brought out his wife, two small sons, a big black dog, and his sister-in-law. His wife, blond and blue-eyed, a very fair complexion, somewhat on the round side, smiled warmly into the car. They spoke quickly and we drove off.

Before heading to the outskirts of Asuncion where Jorge lived, we made another quick stop at a hospital where, Jorge informed us, Antonio was going to examine a newborn for an adoption. After inspecting the infant, a little girl, with great satisfaction he jumped back into the car to wave us on. We were quickly reassured that he only did one adoption at a time. I imagined that this baby child had parents somewhere waiting to fetch her laden with stories of biological failure and fat with an urgency to possess and raise a child. What a unique fraternity we were, taking children from other's womb and sperm, having to live forever outside the world of fact and history a past forever a blank.

Chapter 6

From the start, Antonio loomed large. An existential familiarity stirred within us both the minute he tagged us at the airport. We were almost immediately fixed to him. He was a man of about five-foot-five-inches, with an exceedingly compact body except for an emerging paunch. His hair ringed a balding head with thinning wisps of black. And his face held the intrigue of ancestral mixture, strongly Indian with a splash of the deep Mediterranean, with hues of bronze coloring his skin. His eyes intense eastern-shaped and penetrating, were a clear and undiluted dark brown verging on black. His nose at profile was like an eagle's beak. Generally I was not so quickly focused on a man's features and physical appearance. I usually tried to seek out the soul first and worked hard not to regard men as sexual objects. As a matter of fact, my reputation at my job as a director of a social service-like agency was pristine to a fault in this respect.

Approaching forty when I started being with Frank, I was almost vacant and atrophied sexually. My own sexuality had gotten by then so submerged that dreams of any kind were nearly lost to me. In early childhood my father, trained me to neuter sexual difference and to hold a public posture that would disregard all gender lines. Deviating from this persuasive indoctrination brought me too much internal disunity and disharmony to allow even an occasional sexual fantasy about anyone either male or female with whom I was publicly in contact. I verged on the airless and nearly perfect in this piercing and deliberate pursuit to locate another person's inner being or soul. I scoured the face to penetrate the interior, my sight a scalpel dividing the exterior, what was surface. Immediate and intense connections were sought. I at times frightened people with this unmasking. In myself I sacrificed or nearly lost and shut down permanently those parts which could respond, shoot off in the presence of someone immediately and mysteriously captivating or attractive.

The divining of a soul kept in check a behemoth sexual appetite which I feared would be unruly and uncontrollable if left to surface.

In spite of my father's dictums I had been a lively and irrepressibly precocious girl who could not suppress an endless and unchecked array of attractions almost mythic in nature. As a girl I would dream of being taken off and rescued by a gallant man and who could and would fall in love on stairwells, on short subway rides, at bus depots with males and females, old people and young ones, always wanting to curl up on some warm looking, mostly black woman's lap, or to walk off just as I was mounting a waited for bus with some strange man for a brief and unencumbered time of rapture. As an eighteen year old I said with conviction that I would rather play cello and write poetry and have affairs with famous men than go to college. Submissive to the near extinction of my own will and identity, I went to College, as was my father's desire for me, to prepare for ultimate economic self-sufficiency. I was not to be allowed the luxury and professional indulgence of art and thought. Schooling was expeditious and necessary for future economic security. The passions had to be suppressed or sublimated. This was confusing to me since I had been as a child surrounded by music and art.

My parents were known in the community as highly cultivated and cultured people. This was not by accident. What they took seriously in themselves was not to be available to me except circuitously, and secondarily. Rebellious I reserved for those rare times when my desire for something and their disapproval clashed to the point of desperation and I felt no choice but to rise up. Critical issues of autonomy and independence, fueled that kind of contest, not my acute but hidden desire for a life of art. I was a girl who learned to preserve and protect herself from dangerous and overpowering feelings of anxiety and inner turmoil with buttery velvet sexual fantasies, a nearly constant presence. Staying within the orbit of a good girl, at college I prepared for work broadly in the areas of education and social service.

Stepping ultimately into a job which merged these fields and which I held for nearly two decades and onto which my restless soul applied poetry to appease the furies within.

Frank and psychotherapy helped me resuscitate my passionate and sexual side as well as to survive combative and emerging feelings of remorse and fury at the foolishness of having let that interior self lapse. I had allowed myself to get beaten inward and numbed by a first marriage almost constructed and orchestrated to do just that. I am aware that I was not unique in this submergence of an erotic and sexual self. Contemporary novels bulged with comparable experiences and sentiments. For a time I devoured these as I came to reclaim this submerged self. A longing to be again open to the poetry and passion quieted within me had ultimately driven me out of my marriage. My subdued but driving hunger had found Frank who could accept nothing less than a fully present woman. Our relationship formed as I was able to emerge and thaw.

Antonio was rapidly becoming the object of this heated and reawakened woman. I was thrown by the immediacy and intensity of my attraction to him. I was bemused at having found him like Marlon Brando. I was opening like that young girl in me again. Impending motherhood was culling up a dewy softness, a moistening, a defenceless receptivity. Antonio as if scripted in a myth was the object of this blush of love, his face being the first my eyes settled on as I reached the soil from which my Luca had been born.

As if attached by a yet severed birthing cord, Frank and I had followed Antonio into his car for the forty minute drive to the outskirts of Asuncion where we came upon a series of one story white stucco houses with red roofs, similar to a track of modest suburban houses. We pulled up to what looked like a nearly new white house where a group of people were sitting comfortably in and about the front yard. As we got out of the car their attention was naturally drawn to us. They

greeted Jorge warmly and enthusiastically, approaching Antonio with more formality. It was evident from the first that Antonio was not a familiar presence in their company but an individual who was nevertheless known and thought of with great respect. Women gathered around Antonio leaning in for a kiss or an embrace which he did most obligingly. They too seemed to find him irresistible. I felt an immediate kinship with these gathering women. Antonio brought out the flirtatious in women.

After Antonio had been well recognized by both the male and female members of this party, Jorge began to introduce us formally. Each individual could not have been more welcoming. The children, of whom there were many, darted in and about us smiling and laughing. Many of the men present not only were members of the soccer team, and worked with the women in the Apple English Language and Translation School which Jorge owned with his brother-in-law. Everyone wanted to practice English, a major preoccupation for many of them. Neither of us spoke much Spanish, though we understood a little. The men were treated to some Scotch while I was offered beer, wine, or punch. Dying for a glass of Scotch, I settled for punch. I had come to Paraguay after all to adopt a baby and didn't want to taint or diminish my image of motherhood. Antonio without looking directly never took his eyes off either of us.

Jorge's wife whose name I never learned told me she had nearly completed her preparation to become a dentist. Pointing out her children, she proceeded to bring out some family photos of a recent trip to Disneyworld. There were a multitude of photographs depicting the family posing with Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Pluto, and the others. Quickly I saw the importance and stature the world of Disney held for her and her family. My life had been almost devoid of a familiarity with these Disney characters. My family had held disdain and distance from this sort of pop culture. I had been groomed on chamber music and fine art and had

never, to the constant amazement of Frank, connected to anything much outside of that. It was a source of running quasi-antagonism between us that the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Eric Clapton had slipped me by. "Who's that singing or playing?" Frank would ask when we'd drive. "Eric Clapton," became my standard answer. Our generational differences were most clearly evident around issues of music and culture. Frank was very much a child of the sixties. I grew up hot housed by my culture minded parents. For Frank and me this reminded us not only of our differences but of a possible source of discontent.

There were a multitude of children running freely and happily weaving in and about the adults like spring dancers around a maypole. No one raised a voice or summoned a child to the side to be admonished. Every once in a while a child would get playfully tossed in the air. Never did the children seem like an intrusion or a bother, neither were they the focus of everyone's incessant attention. They just seemed pleased to be there.

Steaks were cooking over a large open barbecue pit outside the enclosed kitchen. Long tables were spread out and eventually everyone gathered around to eat. Most of the guests stood while they ate, Frank and I however were instructed to sit at our own table and served what appeared to be the prime slices of meat. Accompanying the steak was a potato-like vegetable known as yucca. Mostly silent, we finished everything we were offered and finally declined to have anything more. Frank, a butcher's son, had spent more than a decade being a vegetarian. His diet was an important and well thought out part of his existence. Still, he gracefully consumed the steak.

Antonio signalled to us that it was time to go. We would be leaving Jorge with his family and guests. Jorge explained to us as we parted that Antonio and he would come to get us at the hotel in a day-and-a-half. They would come at 3 a.m. in order to get to the courthouse as it opened at 8 a.m. to make the final preparations

for the adoption which would take place later that day. He would call us at the hotel the next day to confirm these arrangements. We warmly bid our afternoon friends goodbye with a familiarity which belied the limited time we had spent with them. And finally, there we were in a little red Chevette alone for the first time with Antonio who was just a beginning student of English.

We all looked at each other and smiled awkwardly as we pulled away, Frank and I embarrassed that we had never taken the time to learn Spanish. Unthinkable elsewhere in the world, we had both managed a fair amount of schooling while remaining for the most part monolingual. Frank was up front next to Antonio and I sat in the back seat. Again an intense image of Marlon Brando flashed through me as I looked at Antonio through the rear view mirror. Having nearly reached the hotel, Antonio asked if we wouldn't want to join him and his family at his country house about an hour's drive away. In unison without hesitating we answered, "Yes". Spinning around, we headed quickly to land that was rapidly appearing more and more rural.

Antonio put on a Julio Iglesias tape and we drove serenaded in a comfortable silence. The sentimentality of his song was a perfect palliative for the situation and our drive. My feelings were increasingly raw and emotional. I was being receptive in a rare and unguarded way. I could sense that Frank too had yielded up to the situation. This was an incredibly free and open time. With a subtlety that belied his extroverted presence Antonio had so quickly relieved us of a tentative and wary posture. With so few common words, we had come to trust him and entrust him with our pending fate.

Chapter 7

Approaching the town of San Antonio more than likely a source for his name, Antonio assumed yet another posture. He became nearly giddy and boisterous as he greeted people on the street as we drove by. Everyone seemed to know him, and seemed happy to see him. He was definitely in his place, and appeared without any formality or reserve. We stopped by a simple white washed cottage and were immediately greeted by Antonio's wife and one of their small boys. She waved us in and we were introduced to a six or seven people seated around on long, narrow table engrossed in a game of bingo. They looked up for moments, smiled happily at Antonio, and excused themselves to continue their game.

Almost as quickly as we entered we left taking Antonio's wife and what appeared to be the younger son with us. He seemed to be about four-years-old and carried a baby bottle filled with what looked like Coca Cola. His wife and son squeezed in next to me and kept looking over and smiling. I smiled back and gave the little boy a quick hug. I have always been comfortable with small children who seemed to warm up to me just as easily. We drove on through the town, Antonio continuing to greet everyone we passed, much like a dignitary. We came upon a long winding dirt road through a thicket of underbrush. An exceedingly lovely manor house stood before us on the banks of a sprightly rushing brook which led immediately to a wide and imposing river. Argentina, Antonio pointed out in the distance, the other bank of the river. Antonio parked the car and piled us all out. He immediately began to show us this property. Other than us no one seemed to be around. He said the house was his uncle's although his uncle never appeared. The house and the grounds had the appearance of belonging to someone of wealth and stature. We entered a large outbuilding full of cowhides. They were apparently being prepared for tanning and for being crafted into leather products. The size and

number of the hides indicated a substantial source for these items.

We moved on quickly finding ourselves on a path tangled with strange and beautiful vegetation. Antonio had grabbed a couple of bathing trunks from the house before we had entertained the walk. This had immediately thrown me into a state of anxiety not wanting to swim or display my body. But I was too caught up in these lush and unfamiliar surroundings to let those feelings linger. Nature had always been a palliative for me. Had Antonio intuitively known that and thus brought us here? He increasingly radiated extraordinary powers and with each step became larger and more mythic. Coming upon the brook, we immediately and wordlessly tossed off our shoes and waded into the crisp, cool water. He threw a pair of trunks at Frank who removed himself discretely coming back moments later stripped down but for the swimsuit, then following Antonio to the ledge above a rushing stream of water leading off a dam. Nearly simultaneously they plunged in and swam about in and out of the rapid currents. Antonio's wife looked on tolerant but a little reproving. I couldn't help but admire Frank's ability to participate with such natural ease and camaraderie.

We were each on our own and both well aware that our being able to adopt Luca rested exclusively on our relationship with Antonio. There was no opportunity for consultation or conversation between us. Whatever inner resources we each had were called on to guide us through the afternoon. We had to be able to trust ourselves and each other not to harm our impending adoption of Luca. Without fully understanding the ground rules or the people, we had to display an impeccable sensitivity and a flawless sense of unity. Already in our brief history with Paraguay, a child had been snatched from us because we lacked this understanding. Our inner rhythms and harmony as a couple, the linchpin for our success. It was impossible to resist the manner in which Antonio was engaging us. By now I was sure Antonio was that intentional and that insightful. In an eight

hour acquaintance, I had already come to believe that.

The sun was setting its familiar hues of reds fanning the sky. Struck by it almost simultaneously, Antonio and I captured each other in an intense gaze. Often I had told Frank, my diamonds were sunrises and sunsets. Antonio appeared to feel the same way. What was I doing falling in love, sharing rapture with this man, the lawyer who was to represent us for our adoption? A man so easily familiar and so quickly desired. Without verbalizing it, I felt Frank making an intense connection with Antonio too.

Frank and Antonio helped us into the back seat and we all drove off. I cast a look back on the idyllic house on the bank of the little brook. Dark now, we pulled up to yet another property. The house was set in a town. It seemed to be a working farm with a series of connected buildings. We were invited on a quick tour, no one was home. We got the sense that this was Antonio's country house. His son brought us over to see a monkey housed in a small cage, then Antonio beckoning impatiently, got us back into the car for a final stop to pick up Antonio's other son. Sunday evening and we were headed back to Asuncion and our hotel. The little boys were tucked tightly between Antonio's wife and me. As we drove back into Asuncion, Antonio stopped at a street vendor and bought us all some barbecued steak. He encouraged us to eat healthy portions, which we did obligingly. Frank had more meat in one day than he had had in ten years. Driving on through the city streets we got a flat tire. Frank and Antonio shoulder to shoulder changed it quickly and effortlessly. By now they seemed like buddies and old friends.

Later, in our room, we again lapsed into that silence that by now had become like conversation during the course of this adoption. We fell asleep easily, never speaking of what was anticipated. We had been embraced like family on our first day in Paraguay. Never were we made to feel like nervous clients beholden to a lawyer's machinations and incessantly clicking timer metering all dialogue. If one

could be relaxed in these circumstances we were. Antonio had diffused the situation and totally gained our trust.

The next morning brought us an expanse of free time. Before breakfast, Jorge had called to confirm that we were to be ready to leave at 3 a.m. the next day and to have with us the following items for Luca: diapers, bottles, a pacifier, a couple of changes of clothing, and some blankets. Only then as he was talking did I tense with our impending reality my hands trembling with anticipation. Trembling hands had in the past been endemic of a vulnerable and impassioned self-expression, derision and mockery followed from nay-sayers. A person at my job with a particular distaste or discomfort with me once when presumed out of my sight proceeded to imitate me making an impassioned pronouncement with hands quivering like frail twigs in the wind. I had since that time worked hard on such obvious exposure. Only now I wasn't able to access that kind of learned control.

Jorge proceeded to say that Antonio requested that we stay near the hotel during the day and if we were to leave not to go too far and definitely not to walk outside our room without our passport and immigration papers. He said that everyone enjoyed meeting us and that he looked forward to seeing us again in the early morning. Jorge's English was nearly perfect. He had lived and worked for a few years in California. Rather than fan our anxiety, and noticing my trembling hands, Frank immediately suggested we have breakfast and plan our day.

Breakfast was another revelation. Frank had talked of the ample supply of fresh fruits, assorted breads, rolls and cakes, and the sliced meats that were part of the hotel buffet. It was far more elaborate and sumptuous than I had imagined. This was not a Latin America of starving peasants and scarce food. This was the Latin America of the constantly endangered aristocracy surrounding itself by a kind of opulence that ignored the impoverished economic plight of the masses. Only Paraguay housed Germans practiced in treachery and had been able to suppress even

a hint of revolt for thirty-five years. This was as much of the history of this landlocked country that we had been able to garner.

At Frank's prodding we decided to explore the downtown area of Asuncion keeping in mind Antonio's warning. I being the more obedient by training would not on my own have ventured out of the hotel and most probably not out of the room. Bookstores were the object of our outing. Making sure we had all our papers, we went out into the city streets. Frank had neither the heart nor the chance to explore Asuncion the last time. This was a legal banking holiday, so most stores and businesses were closed. The streets were quiet and empty. Few cars and buses transversed the streets. The few people we did pass did not in any way acknowledge our presence on the street. I thought that there must be norms for street behavior governing the exchanges of glances. Perhaps fear blinded the recognition of others. There were budding questions for which we would for the present have no answers. At close intervals stood police officers at strict attention with what looked machine guns propped by their legs. We knew enough not to engage them even for directions or to exchange looks. Penetrating in the hush a country that was anomalous. German operated hotels and heavily armed ubiquitous police began to tell the tale. A cautiousness and respect increasingly overtook us. As two seasoned New Yorkers we had learned to deal with and to tolerate the omnipresence of random assaults and to regard police as individuals who protected if hot headed and abusive at times. Undeniably, if not fully explicable, there was something different and forbidding on these streets.

When we came upon a rectangular-shaped park we sat down on a bench to rest. The vegetation around us was sparse. A few Indians sat sipping a drink out of a crooked straw. We speculated that the drink was filled with exotic hallucinogens, the Indians being so inward and docile. Emerging were so many things we wanted to know about Paraguay, and increasingly obvious, few sources from which to get

any information. After a time, we began to walk again, coming upon an open bookstore. On the shelves were numerous technical books, with a few biographies and local histories. Although the titles were in Spanish, we could see that there wasn't much in the area of fiction or philosophy. With Antonio's warning paramount in our minds, we dared not ask the person at the cash register with questions in either Spanish or English. Attempting to be matter of fact, we made our stop here brief and by early afternoon were back in the hotel.

We spent the rest of the day napping and preparing for the next day, sitting together near the open French window reading books we had brought from home. We did not leave the room again and ordered room service for a late afternoon meal. I maintained a steely, stoic silence. Frank had tutored me in the art of unspeaking. My inclination was to talk incessantly when I was on edge. I learned from Frank the art and benefit of wordlessness, to mediate and focus inward instead.

I can't adequately describe what it was I was feeling as I packed the little diaper bag Frank's mother had given us. Folding each little infant stretchie and undershirt covered with matching pastel prancing lambs made me tearful and apocalyptic. Occasionally an abrasive embarrassment and tentativeness would intrude. It had been twenty years since I had handled baby clothes. Awkward and guarded even then about the ripe and opulent feelings attempting to burst from me like a cracked rib, I could now hardly contain the emotion flooding me. A vein of time drove through my life joining me to that past as if nothing had existed or transpired in between.

I remembered when, in my twenties at these times of rich and unabsorbable emotion, how I would talk incessantly feigning great openness as a way of being silent. Pregnant and awaiting the birth of Jeremy, I had actively pursued and accepted an opportunity to air my anxieties of producing a multiply handicapped child on a public radio show. This form of explicitness was a consistent and

cultivated means of operating for me. Once, a still wet newly wed, I'd conceived and carried a baby for nearly eight months who was delivered dead. This little fetus, named Alonzo, had been in trouble from the start. A pregnancy filled with multiple indications for a bad outcome confronted me but because of the politics and the time and an unsupportive family cluster I was unable to pursue any alternatives than to hold on to this predictably bad birth. Every physician consulted believed that I had been part of a German Measle epidemic. But I was unable to find a second physician to sign on to my petition for a hospital and legal justification to terminate a pregnancy. Nightmares and names filled my everyday life as my tummy stretched to accommodate the growing baby inside.

My husband resorted to a state of total denial as a way of coping. My need to speak out loud filled doctors' offices to the point of disturbance. Although my physician had not heard a heartbeat for a number of weeks he neglected to tell me this. A mother's forboding drove me finally to the hospital to admit myself. The chief of staff, seeing me so distraught, decided to remove the baby the next day. Still I was not informed that Alonzo, as he was now called, was minus a heart beat. Relief brought on natural labor pains which frightened me. I lost control and the medical practitioners on hand responded by locking me into restraints as they removed the baby, refusing to administer any medication to subdue the concomitant and overwhelming pain. I who believed in doing everything thing naturally could not give up Alonzo with grace and control. I sat up my torso encased in wrappings and saw the baby boy as they pulled him from me. Instantly they took him curled and dead to a lab. Back in my room unshackled a woman in a stripped jacket with a basket of notions asked me if I had a boy or a girl. "Dead," was all I answered.

Rebecca throughout her childhood would ask occasionally, "How old would Alonzo be now?" "Let's see, three years older than Jeremy," I would answer simply.

I had always always wanted to keep the promise of Alonzo of having a third child. My body when it was able wanted so to bear another child but the unsuitability of my relationships kept that desire at bay. Now I was making the final preparations and making good on that promise. A mythic arc was to be completed Alonzo would gain a presence in this little boy. Although Frank had known about Alonzo, I did not fill him with this vivid and intensely recollected connection to my past. In part, I was being governed by our unwritten code of unspeaking the unnecessary or extraneous at times like this one.

Chapter 8

Frank and I lay on the bed fully clothed waiting for Jorge to call, everything we needed to take ready at the door. Precisely at 3 a.m., the hotel phone rang. Antonio and Jorge were in the lobby ready to leave. We settled in the little red Chevette heading for Stroessner, a five hour ride through the ebbing night. Next to me the diaper bag was filled to capacity. Through the sunrise we rode speaking little. Jorge occasionally pointing out landmarks as we drove by. For the most part we were distracted and preoccupied. Antonio had that labored breathing one got before a performance. He concentrated on driving and did not even attempt to exchange any words. As the day lit up we arrived in a frontier town. The streets were lined with open air markets breaking out their wares. Jorge told us that one could buy anything in these markets, including babies.

Antonio drove directly to the court house, a one story structure, or series of stucco structures connected by exterior walkways. Antonio entered as the court house opened leaving us with Jorge. Within minutes, Antonio reappeared saying he had some paperwork to complete and with that deposited us with Jorge at the local bus depot. He asked us simply to be as unobtrusive as possible and not to let others hear us converse in English. A tension ran through us as we sensed the danger. This was the town owned by and named after Paraguay's dictator, General Stroessner. Infamy was the norm. We were understanding increasingly that the hazard we were exposing ourselves to was very real. We saw no humor or ease in Antonio's demeanor. We ordered something cold to drink and waited quietly trying to appear ordinary and calm. Frank's eyes and mine never met.

At noon, Antonio came for us. Once in the car he told us that at 2 o'clock we would return to the court house to pick up some papers and would then go to the Casa Cuna to get the baby. We'd have to return to the court house for the adoption

proceedings with the baby. The last waiting was always the worst and the least bearable. It is when one must muster the greatest courage and control. Adrienne Rich says these times call for a "terrible patience". My inner resources were stretched to their limit as I kept referring to her words. This was the time in labor near the end when the pain was most acute, my body writhing in an urge to push, while being instructed firmly by the attending team to pant to stave off the baby's birth. Don't push, don't bolt, wait! Childbirth kept being a touchstone for me. How was Frank surviving this difficult time? We had not been able to talk together since we had climbed into the little red Chevette in the very early morning.

Antonio pulled the car up to his sister's house. A woman and two children came rushing outside to greet him. With his great expressive warmth, Antonio swept the children, a girl of about eleven and a boy about six, into his arms. They were obviously delighted to see him. We were welcomed into the simple white stucco house where a long wooden table was prepared with lunch. Birthday streamers criss-crossed the ceiling of the room honoring the little boy. Antonio's brother-in-law, an instructor at the Itaipu Dam, soon arrived. The Dam is the biggest of its size in the world. Many of the employees were given similar housing. The children brought all of us into the open kitchen and yard where half-a-dozen tiny chicks strutted about. After putting the chicks in a cardboard box, we all returned to the dining and living area to eat. The table was set with take-out barbecued chicken, yucca, salad, and beer. The sister encouraged us to fill our plates and eat.

Antonio cleared an area at the end of the table where he opened his typewriter and began to type feverishly. Little conversation transpired between us as we ate. Antonio's typing provided a continuo for our silence. The little girl went out of the room returning in a crisp school uniform with a big bow in her hair. Smiling sweetly, she kissed Antonio and left for school. She attended school only in

the afternoons. The little boy was still too young for school. Holding the cheeping little chicks tightly on his lap, he sat near me. We kept exchanging large warm glances. This closeness with the little boy transfused me with a feeling of tranquility and calm. Children often affected me that way pulling me from a tense preoccupation and centering me in the simple and the immediate. Antonio ate rapidly after he finished typing. The family then passed a cup holding a curved straw. The drink was known as Matte, an herbal tea which often completed a meal. Traditionally Matte was shared communally, though we were not offered any. This was the drink we had seen the Indians sipping in the park. Again we wondered if this wasn't in fact a drug. It was time to go.

Antonio exited quickly. The family escorted us to the car. In his sister's clasp was the recognition of the impending event. It was an expression of solidarity. Then we left to bring the baby into all of our lives. At precisely 2 p.m. we were back at the court house. Antonio went inside, returning moments later with some documents in hand. As we drove off, Antonio seemed to be feeling great relief. We were eminently getting Luca. Stroessner beyond the windows of the car was a blur a place without proportion or definition. We were clasped in the agony of expectation. I was crowded with the final and most intense pains of birth. Frank allowed for a little warming and placed his hand on mine. We were about to see the little baby Frank had held some six weeks before. That small person whom Frank had embraced and taken in with a life-abiding love. We had come to get him. This person already known as Luca waiting to be united with us.

Measured breathing and restrained tears brought us to the curb of a low lying one story building tucked behind a thick and imposing wrought iron fence and gate. In front of the gate stood a soldier with a machine gun pointing toward us. Antonio walked up to the gate, rang a bell, and a starchly dressed nurse came out. After reviewing the papers Antonio handed her through the gate, she turned to the

soldier and instructed him to let us in. Antonio, Frank, Jorge and I, holding the diaper bag, entered the grounds of the Casa Cuna where our Luca had lived for thirteen days. We were asked to sit in a small reception room facing a glass-enclosed office. To the right of us was a window looking into a room. Six or seven babies, eight months to a year old, were sitting huddled together like a litter of abandoned kittens. I looked at them, a sharp pain lighting through me, and sat down close to Frank. Jorge glanced at us encouragingly. We had learned throughout the day to say little, and to move around even less.

Antonio again showed the documents to a very official and officious looking woman who after examining them signaled to another fully uniformed nurse. The nurse came over to us and with the help of Jorge asked us for the baby's clothes. I gave her a lamb covered stretchie, a tiny matching undershirt, and an infant-sized pamper. With these in hand she disappeared. We then went into the office to sign some forms. Without hesitating or asking any questions, we signed where Antonio told us. The room was filled with the kind of solemnity echoing in any auspicious event. The official looking woman maintained an unflinching stare. Turning toward Antonio, she said that another son of Paraguay was being taken away. Antonio standing near her nodded keeping the conversation at a minimum. The starchy looking nurse reappeared with a tiny sleeping baby dressed in a lamb covered stretchie. She was instructed to hand the baby to me and after brief formalities, Antonio had us back on the street and into the little red car.

We left the Casa Cuna as if we were fleeing and most probably we were. From the moment he was handed to me Luca curled tightly into my breast. Frank sat close, his arm on my shoulder, one hand on Luca. We do not know people until times like this. Frank's face had the openness of a basking baby. We were both close and exposed. Our love for Luca was unrestrained and inexplicit.

We drove up to the now familiar court house. This time we all got out of the

car. I was escorted gingerly, enclosed by this protective flank of men. Antonio greeted the judge who was informally dressed in an open white short sleeved shirt. He smiled at us and asked us to step up to the bench. We were given an oath which Jorge translated. He then asked us to swear that we would be good parents to Luca, that we would provide him with a good home, and that we would give him a good education. Jorge translated the testimony. We were asked to sign more documents and with that the judge shook Frank's hand and wished us both well. Luca slept through the entire proceeding. Antonio asked us to wait outside the court room with Jorge while he continued to talk with the judge. Moments later the judge called me back into the court room, "How old are you?" he asked. "Forty-eight," I answered simply and without hesitation. He looked at me for moments, smiled and waved me on.

Antonio then guided us out of the court house and toward the car holding me by the arm. It wasn't until we were in the car and safely on the road out of the proximity of the court house that Antonio gave an ear splitting hoot. And he did not settle down or remain quiet for the remainder of the journey home. We were heading back to Asuncion, this time with Luca in our midst. Antonio soon stopped and got some Matte, which he shared with Jorge. Still we were offered none. We were sure by now that this tea contained a strong narcotic. Antonio was exceedingly animated, filled with the exuberance he showed on Sunday. Occasionally he looked back at us and touched Luca.

Putting on a Julio Iglesias tape we drove on as the day deepened into night. Luca felt like he had always been on my lap. We stopped for food, barbecued steaks, yucca, and beer. Antonio put two chairs together to cradle Luca. Beaming at each other and casting frequent glances at Luca we ate ravenously. Before returning to the car, we went to a nearby store to buy some formula. Leaving nothing to chance, Antonio insured we had formula on hand. Having successfully nursed Jeremy and

Rebecca, I was awkward about bottle feeding. The advent of giving a baby a bottle had provided me with the only strong reservation about my ability to nurture and mother an infant. My breasts already tingled with a desire to tend to Luca in this way. I had to hold off an acute desire to put a breast in Luca's mouth until Frank and I were alone with him.

It was the darkest part of night and we were back in the car Antonio caught up in the rhythmic incantation of an epic sounding poem. It was a tome of love he composed for his wife in courtship. Jorge shared with us that Antonio had been a seminarian and a student of classics for seven years prior to marrying his wife. A troubadour, a poet, a humanist, and a near priest was now the custodian of our fate. I was filled with a sensuality that in my experience accompanied the first days of mothering. Antonio was increasingly becoming an object of desire. Again he was reminiscent of Marlon Brando. A poet, a lawyer, and the attendant for the successful delivery of our child, the combination was irresistible to me. We drove up the circular driveway leading to our hotel. A uniformed doorman waited with the ornate brass doors held open. With Luca deep in my arms, Antonio helped us from the car. After an affection embrace for each of us, he told us that he would pick us up at 8 a.m. the next day to continue the necessary and remaining processing to complete the adoption.

Once in the room we realized that we forgot to order a crib from the hotel. Three abreast in the double bed we began our life together. Ours was a curious juxtaposition. Travelling to the near end of the world, Frank found his son. His eyes were the first to see him, his the first arms to hold him. I had no proprietary rights. Frank had the aura of first possession. A woman generally gave a child to a man. This bestowal of progeny could determine an entire life. I was given this child. Frank had carried him to me. A precarious and time worn male/female balance had been altered. How would this hierarchy of events be played out in the

inevitable times of marital tension and disorder?

Luca slept almost too peacefully. He did not jerk about and breathe spasmodically looking as if her were about to seizure or expire. Our eyes as if held open by toothpicks lay riveted on his face. It was too soon to notice if he were undersize or normal and we could not have detailed a feature. We just lay there a human creche. He was absorbed into us almost instantaneously. We were a family. And this small person melding into our torsos was as if dropped from heaven. Frank had not chased after baby carriages to peer inside. He did not sit transfixed on a bus or subway at some small person pulling a bottle in and out of his/her mouth. I had not known that in him was a baby fancier, that was my territory. If a baby would show up somewhere people would say, "Go get Naomi." And they would always get the expected response. I liked the image of the mother eternal. Without precedent, I had made it up. Motherliness was an essential and necessary part of my persona. At work they called me, "Ma." But Frank, he had not identified or revealed himself in this way.

Frank must have had a feeling of triumph laced with rage. In the most bitter moments of his divorce, his ex- wife had blamed him for her childlessness at almost 40. Frank too was without a child although his grief and guilt were focussed exclusively on her dilemma and his culpability. It was true that he had walked out. But that had been ten years before when she was 30. In one of the rare times that I violated my own principle of non- interference in any marital dismemberment, I pointed out that had she wanted a child that badly, she would have had one by now. Parenthetically, as we lay there in Paraguay with our son, she had still not become a mother. As I watched Frank gaze at Luca, I could not help but wonder why he had not berated and excoriated her for all the years he had been deprived of fatherhood. Or had it taken Luca to draw that out? I was the one to witness this first bonding, although my heart was not far behind.

Chapter 9

Antonio let no time elapse. At 8 A.M. the next morning he and Jorge came by for us to undertake the second leg of this adoption process. We had merged as a family in the course of the night. Luca was fast asleep in the crook of my arm as we climbed back into the little red Chevette. Antonio was taut and preoccupied but turned quickly to squeeze Luca's little leg and to smile deeply at both of us before pulling off. We were on our way to the Hall of Justice, a prepossessing marble structure designed to dwarf and diminish people. Like well-trained children we followed Antonio closely into the auspicious building. He sat us on a bench outside a series of offices on the third floor and we were instructed to remain quiet and unobtrusive. Luca lay still in a deep sleep enabling us to remain docile and unassuming.

We watched Antonio as he walked in and out of a series of offices carrying a sheaf of documents and smoking cigarettes. We had not noticed him smoking before. Occasionally, he looked over at us reassuringly although we were not filled in about specifics. Jorge sat quietly across from us. We knew that we were not to display any expressions of demonstrativeness toward Luca. His great sleepiness protected him from our self-imposed stiffness. Suddenly Antonio appeared and got us to follow him quickly. We were escorted rapidly but discretely out of the Hall of Justice and back into the car. Antonio put his thumb strongly up into the air, "Success," he said and we were off.

Never had we believed in someone so much. He was the father or the god, a bulwark of strength, one recurrently wished for but who existed only in myth. We had an implicit faith that he could do no wrong. He had an imperious and absolute need to cultivate that feeling in us. His were the broad shoulders that elicited dependency in others. He refused questioning or accommodation. He seemed to

operate best when entrusted with a task without qualification. He was part priest, part lover, part of an unfathomable reality into which we had stumbled. He was a savior. He was instrumental in creating these thoughts. Perhaps the situation called for this level of dependency and trust. Perhaps that was the only way he could navigate us through all of this. Whatever, we were ready subjects. We consented to having these feelings returning us to states of childlike reverence, trust, and obedience. This was part of the bargain, part of the deal. We had known him correctly from from the first. With our baby breathing softly against us, what other recourse was available to us? And Antonio did in actuality have the stature and the bearing and the inner strength to warrant feelings of this sort.

The car stopped as we arrive at the Apple School of Language and Translation all of us getting out of the car. We were greeted and crowded around by many of the individuals we had met at Jorge's house only days before. They were all eager to see the baby. The women took him and passed him around. Drawing his blankets from him they examined him closely. They looked at him with the scrutiny and attention of a collection of grandmas and aunts. Planting kisses on his cheeks and neck and hands they commented on his beauty. He seemed almost to be an offering to an unquenchable need on many women's parts to handle and fondle a recently born child. It was a form of welcome, it was a way to succor a hunger in us to be trusted and to nurture and to give.

I was often bitten by that longing and had been known to sense the presence of a baby and to rush abruptly off to hold the tiny person close to my heart and nose. The smell of someone new, the small body, the tiny bones, the vulnerability tug off an armor we are forced to wear. We have a need of such vulnerability. Many women capture this feeling again by peering into carriages or by this kind of quick and intense embrace. I recognized this chorus of coos and would have joined if the baby had not been my own. The baby's mother most often stands off to the side to

watch. This was an unspoken of understanding.

Before handing him back, they told us to make sure he wore socks at all times. We had kept his feet bare although covered by blankets. This was winter in Paraguay, and although the weather seemed warm to us, one had to take special precaution due to a subtle but potentially health threatening winter wind. Duly told, we promised to oblige. Antonio was ready to leave and off we went in a flurry of good wishes and warm farewells.

Antonio had left all of the documents we had accumulated from the adoption proceedings thus far to be translated. We had become familiar by now with the force and decisiveness of Antonio's exits. Never quite knowing what's next, we found ourselves deposited back at the hotel. It was midday. Before leaving us, Antonio informed us that the next day, Thursday, was yet another legal holiday, and therefore no further business could be conducted. He would however, be by again on Friday at 8 a.m. to continue our processing. Once again we were asked to stay near the hotel and not to leave without our papers. The little red car disappeared into the day.

For the first time since our arrival we felt abandoned and lost. We were not used managing our own time to functioning without being directed by Antonio. We had become so dependent in so short a time. To be sure we were in circumstances different from any we had known, in a place where the rules were obscure and inaccessible to us. Frank, Luca, and I returned to our room. Luca resisted his bottle and had in fact eaten little since we had gotten him. We attributed his poor appetite to an institutional exhaustion and feeling of relief. Aware, however, that this might be a projection on our parts, and feeling the need for an expert's opinion we decided to call the pediatrician whose name we had been given by the Miami lawyer. This doctor, although Paraguayan, had been trained in the United States. The doctor immediately agreed to come to our hotel room to

examine the baby. We were touched and a little surprised by his offering so readily to do this. Being able to converse in English was a relief. Within an hour, he arrived, greeted us warmly and turned quickly toward the baby. He deftly removed Luca's clothing and began to examine him. He was one of those individuals who had an uncanny way of communicating with infants. Our nine week old son turned toward him and nearly began to speak. This was the first time we had seen Luca animated and responding to another person. After a thorough examination, the doctor commented that he was a generally robust and healthy baby boy. We had told him that Luca had been eating little, and after inspecting the formula we had been offering Luca and the one recommended by the nurse, he doctor disapprovingly informed us that this formula was totally inappropriate to give babies this small. He felt that Luca had been drinking so little because it brought him discomfort. He thought that Luca could be fattened up a little, and that once on the right formula he would begin drinking lustily.

Of course, upon hearing this, I dissolved into tears. To think that our little Luca had been getting this formula for at least two weeks was insufferable to me. The doctor reassured us that whatever Luca lost would be regained in no time on the correct formula. "He is a sturdy and beautiful bouncing boy," he said admiringly. He thought that Luca looked Indian and German. The doctor had, in fact, been to the very remote village where Luca's birth mother lived. He told us that about a hundred years ago German colonialists had settled in the village inhabited by native Guarini Indians. The doctor said the village was about fifteen miles from the Brazilian border, and that the people on either side of the border had features and coloring similar to Luca's. He thought Luca's skin would remain fair and his hair a light brown. He told us not to hesitate to call if we needed him. After being asked, he said his fee was \$15.00. Frank followed him out to replace the formula with the one recommended by the doctor and similar to Enfamil back

home.

Alone with Luca, I burst into tears, feeling frustrated because I couldn't nurse him and horrified that he had been given the wrong formula. Was this just the first slicing pain I would be experiencing as I mothered this child who had not come from my own limbs? Frank returned quickly and Luca as the doctor had predicted drank the new formula down lustily. It was Frank who gave it to him with my overseeing the feeding. How moving it was to watch Luca seize the whole bottle with such focus and determination. How he must have been waiting for such a moment. The pediatrician had brought him even more firmly into our lives.

Luca was once again asleep, more peacefully this time. He appeared so small lying in the white metal crib that had been delivered by the hotel in the morning while we were gone. Ordering in room service for an afternoon meal, we opened the shutters to the afternoon sun and the town of Asuncion sitting on the banks the Parana River facing Argentina on the other side. We ate our lunch with little conversation while Luca slept. Each of us trying to absorb and assimilate what had, in the last few days, taken place.

Chapter 10

Thus we began our life at the hotel as a family. After our meal we lay on the bed reading and napping. Luca woke with a hearty cry for another bottle. Again he drank energetically. After his meal, we wrapped him in a receiving blanket and put on a little cotton bonnet, forewarned about the winteriness of this seemingly warm weather, and we retreated to the hotel's roof terrace. There we found another couple rocking a baby in their arms sitting under an umbrella near the edge of the empty pool. The terrace was filled with plants and flowers and had tables with brightly colored umbrellas, and open deck chairs interspersed on the handsome tiles. Off to the side there was a well-equipped bar. We gathered the pool was empty because it was winter, and we settled ourselves a discrete distance from the other couple. The setting could have been found in a hotel in the Caribbean. The roof terrace was comfortable and inviting and gave us the feeling we were on holiday. We each ordered a beer and for the first time found ourselves relaxing.

Soon we were joined by the other couple, who took the first initiative. It turned out that they were from Boston, and were clients of the same Miami lawyer. Although, they had a different lawyer in Paraguay. They had arrived on the same Sunday but were given their baby at the airport because he had come from Asuncion. Their son was almost five months old, but they had been waiting to come for him since he was born. Some particular legalities had to be worked out prior to their arrival. Their baby was a strapping boy who dwarfed Luca. Next to him Luca seemed prune-like, a little like E.T. Both babies, however were fair-complected, not typical of the photos we had seen of little abandoned Latin American children. Their small son looked as if he had come straight from a farm in Kansas or Minnesota. Luca seemed more Indian. This was just the beginning of those cumbersome and unavoidable comparisons one makes when in contact with

other parents. I had not frequented park benches in the past to avoid just such situations. I had always found conversations about babies disconcerting and unsettling. I always got thrown off the course of my own confidence when being subjected to any such comparisons. Twenty years later, I liked it even less. Here we were hardly a week with our little son and forced by circumstance to regard him objectively. The father, an architect, seemed by far the more nurturing and relaxed parent. The mother seemed very anxious, questioning everything about the adoption process, showing little tolerance for its ambiguities. They felt compelled to share their story and seemed to be a step or two ahead in their adoption process.

After an hour of conversation, we excused ourselves and returned to our room. We exchanged room numbers and offered to be of assistance if they needed us and were given the same accommodation. Back in the safety of our room, we felt extreme relief to be alone again. Frank hesitatingly wondered if Luca would ever be as plump and robust. He asked if I didn't think Luca's features were too Indian. Thus the brutality and odiousness and inevitability of park bench comparisons.

Frank had just been initiated into the ranks of parenthood, where possessiveness and protectiveness are rendered against shifting and competing ideals of individual perfection. No offspring can totally escape being pitted against and diminished by the intrusion of another little identity who without fail always seemed better and more able and developmentally more advanced. Only this time, the baby did not come from us, but rather had come to us. Thus eliminating the possibility of tapping into one's own roots and one's own past for precedents. This also removing personal culpability for apparent deficiencies and liabilities. There was this mysterious force outside somewhere for blame or attributes. Caught up in the web of comparisons, we had to bring ourselves back into a feeling of loyalty and absolute parental love. It was here that my experience counted, if I too was in the strange ground of the found child. I reassured Frank that he had gotten the perfect

child for us and in fact, the perfect child. Quickly reassured, we spent the evening in our room.

Having a rather uneventful night in which Luca ate frequently and well, we ventured out early the next morning to the hotel dining room to have another sumptuous breakfast. There were fresh flowers and linen table clothes, and the abundant array of melons, other fresh fruits, freshly baked cakes, homemade rolls, and country meats. The maitre de looked as if he had been type cast for a German movie, and yet to make the transition. He brought his feet together and kissed the hands of familiar female guests. One could hear him speaking German to individuals sitting at the various tables. Most of the people eating breakfast seemed to be businessmen, but there were occasional couples and a few families. Soon after we arrived, we were joined by the couple from Boston who sat at an adjacent table. They too had spent a comfortable night. I regarded them with more openness, feeling a little unnerved by the German being spoken around us. If not for the darker skinned, Indian looking people in uniform waiting on tables and attending to the buffet who spoke to each other in Spanish, I would have experienced a real crisis of location. We began to feel a camaraderie and kinship with this other couple who also were in the throes of learning to handle their new child as they finalized papers so they too could return home as a family.

After breakfast we promised to meet later on the roof terrace and returned again to our room. Not wanting to be daunted by fear, we decided to take Luca in his umbrella stroller for a walk to the park we had discovered the other day. Our papers firmly secure in the diaper bag we set forth. Again the streets were quiet. We sat in the same bare triangular park, this time some Indian children were playing about near adults who were sitting on benches sipping matte out of crooked straws. We stayed in the park long enough to feel assured that we were not prisoners of the hotel, and to exert and reassert a feeling of independence and freedom. Then we

returned to our room for a midday nap.

Luca continued to eat with each frequent feeding a little more ravenously. In the late afternoon we returned to the roof terrace where we found the other couple along with other hotel guests. This time we ordered a meal of sandwiches and beer sitting at a table together. The babies were each comfortably resting in their nearly identical umbrella strollers. This time we talked more about ourselves and how we found our way to the Miami lawyer. One thing I noticed was that one never introduced a question of why a couple could not or did not have a biological child. With interest, they regarded the fact that I had two biological children. I wanted to make clear that it was I and not Frank who could not reproduce a child of my own. It was becoming apparent that in adoption protocol, one did not easily divulge which of the parents had been unable to produce the necessary seed.

Our experiences with the Miami lawyer were comparable. She had been resilient and persevering in fielding the ups and downs of their adoption. We did not mention that we had had a prior experience with her when we were deciding whether or not to adopt the first little boy. But we all agreed that she was a steadfast and competent lawyer. They spoke of her with near reverence having been up many bad roads in the pursuit of a child. When our sharing had reached its limit, we returned at the same time to our separate rooms. The next day we would each be involved with our respective lawyers fulfilling a sequential bureaucratic step in this primarily inscrutable process of adoption. We wished each other well and promised to meet again on the weekend.

After having a simple supper in our room, we again returned to the roof terrace. There was no one else present and the bar was closed down. The sky was an inky starless black and a back drop for three huge neon billboards; one for Lucky Strike, another for Marlboro, and a third for Pepsi Cola. It was apparent from the size and boldness of the signs that news of the possible connection of cigarette

smoking to lung cancer had not yet reached Paraguay. There was no warning of possible risk to one's health. Lucky Strikes were no longer common in the States. It was all reminiscent of the 50's. The streets were ablaze with interminable clashing car horns. They obviously had also not heard of noise pollution, or of ordinances obliging one to use car horns with restraint. Caravans of brightly colored buses transversed the evening streets. They too seemed to have been pulled right out of a movie set from the 50's. Asuncion was appearing more and more to be stuck somewhere between the late 40's and the early 50's. It getting to be near mid-night, we decided to get to bed. We wanted to be up and ready for Antonio and Jorge when they appeared at 8 o'clock. Luca continued to fill us with confidence as he completed each bottle at his frequent feeding times, otherwise he slept or looked around quietly.

At precisely 8 a.m. Antonio and Jorge arrived but this time they asked if they could come up to the room. We opened the door a little apprehensively and watched as they sat down awkwardly. Antonio asked us to take a seat and proceeded to inform us that there had been a hitch, and that we would not be able to continue with our adoption until the situation had been cleared up. We had become almost casual and acclimated to the fact that we were in a hazardous or harrowing place, one in which order was restored or new order created through terrorism and siege. We knew that the reigning issue of discontent was adoption and that the saber rattled to realign the power structure hungry for the wealth currently so singularly in the hands of entrepreneurial local lawyers. But why was our case the one caught up in the turnstile of this bureaucratic revolt? We were being encircled by an unfathomable and intractable web of intrigue. Terrorism had jumped on our backs like a mad dog on a fleeing leg. It seemed that the judge who had officiated at our adoption in that remote and unscrupulous town of Stroessner had refused to officiate at a series of other adoptions in the last few weeks. Further, he had ordered

the arrest and imprisonment of lawyers identified with these adoptions. He claimed that the infants in question had been brought illegally over the border from Brazil and were part of a baby trafficking ring. In fact, the five babies in question all had been in residence at the same Casa Cuna as Luca and during the same period of time. In retaliation lawyers from the area had formed a class action in which our adoption was being challenged. They wanted a full investigation of the pre-adoption process and evidence that everything was in order.

Our adoption was being held up in an appeal as a challenge to the officiating judge. Insinuated in this was that Luca had perhaps been brought over the border from Brazil or that Luca had been taken from his mother, a Paraguayan, for adoption without her full authorization and consent. In Luca's file there had to be papers with her signature and also copies of advertisements in local papers asking for any objections to her placing her child in adoption. As we stared blankly at Antonio trying to grapple with what he was saying to us through Jorge, he said reassuringly that all of this had been done by the previous lawyer and that everything was in order and that it would just be a matter of time until it was all brought to light. He emphasized the fact that the preliminary work had all been done according to the law and that most importantly the adoption in the court was legal and binding and therefore we had nothing to worry about. The first lawyer really had done her job and earned her fee. Antonio reiterated over and over that we were Luca's parents and that the adoption was legal but because the case was being appealed we would not be issued a passport for Luca until the situation was cleared up. It was now a matter of politics, negotiation, and time. And we had to trust him implicitly, not to question too much, and to be patient until he worked it out. With that he stood up to leave and said that he would be back in contact and to stay very close to the hotel during the weekend.

Chapter 11

The door closed and an avalanche of doubt and fear fell upon us. We were caught up in the very stories that had seemed mostly fictional and unfathomable to us back in the states. All we were left to understand was that in our arms lay our son, our legal son, and that we could hold him, feed him, attend to him as long as we stayed in Paraguay, but that we could not take him back to the United States until this was all cleared up.

Feeling sick and scared we tried to think about what to do next. Here we were in a strange country unable to speak the mother tongue with an exceedingly complex legal situation. We were parents of a child who belonged to a nation other than our own, a country which would allow us to become his parents but would not for the time being permit him to leave its borders with us. We had those pinched nerves and dry heaves one gets when in shock. Hard to grasp, we couldn't conceive a plan. And the only person we could run to, had gone off without any indication when he would return. We were hostage to a band of retaliatory lawyers. Without Antonio's counsel, his assistance, his help we could disappear into the despotic arms of Mutter Paraguay. We could chose to abandon our baby, our child, our son, take our passports and flee to the safe arms of immigration in Miami. Or stay, confused and tentative. Would Antonio just walk away or was he going to fight our case for us?

Had we captured Antonio's imagination, tapped into a raw nerve of indignation, inflamed his judicial pride, excited his manly ardor, aroused a competitive and wily streak sufficiently for him to rise to our aid? At the airport the Miami lawyer had fortuitously said he was a lawyer who would never run out on us. Implicitly we had yielded to him and entrusted ourselves to him in our first transactions, this was not done with cunning or guile but because we must have

immediately felt no choice. Intuitively we had trusted this man with a balding head, a paunchy belly, his face a cross between an Indian chief and Marlon Brando, slow sexy eyes, a wild streak, an insatiable attraction to women, and a poetic connection to the ideal of commitment. We were indeed in his debt. We were in his hold. We were to learn we were safe. In this country of the familiar he had just become like flesh and blood.

When our thoughts could crystallize and our tongues could dislodge, our first instinct was to run for it, to escape, to find our way over the border in the darkened folds of night as we had seen done in the movies, to become fugitives with our infant son. "I will never give him up," I cried out to Frank. "Neither will I," he said more softly. We had only a general guidebook with a sketchy map. This kind of strategic thinking needed more tools. Frank then thought we should go to the United States Embassy. We had remembered from our other travels being told that if we were ever in trouble in a foreign country to head straight for the embassy. We bundled the baby up, took extra supplies, and asked the concierge to get us a taxi. We were only a short distance from the embassy and fumbled with our passports as we asked to see an embassy official at the gate.

There were few people there since it was Friday afternoon and they were not opened for official business. A lovely looking woman who looked Paraguayan but who spoke English perfectly greeted us. As we were attempting to explain our dilemma she brought us into an office which held the embassy counsel. She sat off to the side, and after a few quick preliminary greetings we proceeded to explain our situation. He sat there blankly asking few questions. When we were finished he cleared his voice and in a most officious and detached manner informed us that he could do nothing to interfere with internal legal issues and further were we aware that Appeals could take months, or even years. That we better have a damned good local lawyer, someone who knows his way about, and that there were some

immutable and universal dimensions to all Appeals, primarily that they ran by clocks and calendar days, closely ordered time periods. And yes, that although they were responsible for protecting United States citizens, particularly those singled out and in need, in cases like this he could do nothing but respect and abide by the host country's laws. In a voice that resounded with insincerity, he said that as a parent of two small children of his own he understood what we must be feeling. He then asked curiously about how and through whom we got there and how much we had paid for all this to happen. There was a supercilious gait to his interrogation. Unable to control ourselves further we each blistered into tears. As if he did not want to get his suit stained, he flicked us off, wished us well and asked his associate to sit with us in his waiting room until we calmed down and regained control. Inwardly, I jumped to the conclusion that we had no recourse but to escape. We were both humiliated as we left the embassy and walked back to the hotel. Here in a traitorous country was a slice of our own indistinguishable from the soil in which its lofty building rested. Was this reflective of our foreign policy to blend and bend and mirror each country in which we were represented? We knew we had to banish any tyrannical feelings we were getting politically if for the moment they abated our pain and channeled our anger and our frustration.

Back in our room, I began to sob again. As Frank gave Luca his bottle, I could see his eyes welled with tears. Coincidentally we had a good friend who was a special assistant to the Assistant Secretary of the State Department. Before leaving she had asked us to not hesitate to call her if we needed anything. Her boss was in charge of all the embassies worldwide. She was the kind of friend who was waiting in line to be an aunt to our new child and had a particular interest in our getting home safely. We called both her home and office in Washington only to discover she was on holiday for the next week. We wondered now that our adoption was a cause celebre if our phone in fact was tapped. We knocked about the room and each other like

trapped dogs trying to think up what was next. Laying on top of the bed with the windows opened we stared out. The silence this time was bitter.

What recourse did we have but to flee? Antonio had disappeared into Asuncion leaving us no phone number. He told us to wait until he got back in touch with us. The baby who had cried only sporadically and was almost too easily comforted suddenly howled. His body stretched out with screams. His belly tightening. Suddenly his body erupted all over in small bumps. I rocked him back and forth holding him as close as I could without smothering him. The mother in me told me to hold on and wait. Frank was seized by panic. This was his first experience with a baby's sickness. The insufferable sight of someone so tiny and wordless howling with discomfort is hard for anyone to bear. We also did not want to call attention to ourselves in a public place, like an emergency room, because of Antonio's frequent warnings.

As the first light of day broke we called the pediatrician who asked us to meet him at his office within the hour. There were laboratories there and emergency equipment should that be required. The concierge again got us a taxi and we discovered that his office was not too far from the embassy. He quickly disrobed little Luca who was now asleep with fatigue. He said that little spots starting on the heels of Luca's feet right into his mouth and face could be indicative of many things from an allergic reaction to the formula to a viral infection of some kind or to an infant case of syphilis. Did we know anything about his mother beside the fact that she was sixteen, he asked? Although syphilis was not common in someone so young, she came from a border town where she could have been infected or could have gotten the disease if she had been around Stroessner for any length of time. We had imagined Luca's birth mother as a simple rural farm girl who had fallen in love with a local boy and had given her baby up for adoption because she was too young to keep him. Never had we even thought her to be promiscuous. We knew that she

had put herself in the hands of the local social service agency almost through the entire pregnancy thereby getting medical attention and a supervised birth. In fact, the director of the local social service agency and our initial lawyer knew of Luca from the first because of this. Now we were being dragged by the doctor onto another path. Here we were litigants in a major law case parenting a possible syphilitic infant.

The doctor reassured us that this was curable in one so young if it was caught early on. He proceeded to draw blood from Luca and asked us to return to the hotel and to wait for a call later in the day for the results. He asked us how things were going and we broke down and told him the whole story. "This is a dangerous place," he responded. "They can throw people in jail for years at a time with no apparent reason. There are no real laws that abide. Laws are devised to meet the circumstances. If one is not a member of the reigning Colorado Party one has no chance for employment and almost no rights." He was blunt and matter of fact. We could see that he might be compromising or endangering himself by telling us this. He embraced us as we left and said not to hesitate to call if we needed him. On the way back we understood that we were totally encircled by the unfamiliar and the unknown and that we would have to bear up under the weight of all of this if we were to successfully keep our Luca. As I watched Luca squirm and twitch in my arms on the walk back, I wondered would I also have to watch him suffer with a potentially life threatening illness and pain in the next few days.

We did not leave the hotel room the entire afternoon. I couldn't even put Luca down for moments I was so caught up with worry. Frank, to normalize things ordered in a particularly nice meal with some wine. After five the phone rang. "He's fine, the tests were all negative," the doctor said. "The rash probably is just something minor and will disappear in a day or so. Don't hesitate to call and enjoy the rest of the weekend." With that he hung up. A feeling of excruciating relief

came over us. It was a sign that the rest would work out. We had to maintain our faith in Antonio. And in Luca we could find our way back to regaining control and in being confident. When one embraces the unknown truly, one finds it is truly unknown.

We spent the weekend in and about the hotel. Antonio came by with Jorge on Monday to say that if things could not be resolved by the end of the following week that he wanted us to stay at his house as his guests until the case was solved. Antonio had just moved into a new house which had plenty of room. He did not want us to go out of the hotel until he was back in touch with us and that he was leaving a set of papers for us with a trusted hotel attendant should the police come by and want to know about our situation. It was as if we were under an informal kind of house arrest. Antonio's demeanor had changed. He was direct, explicit, and unconditional in his request. Like the cymbals in a finale his words engulfed us. Were we to expect the thick black boots of the law to kick against our door trying to get our baby and rip him from our arms?

When room service knocked on our door with the boiled water for our formula, my heart sunk and my hand trembled as I took the thermos off the silver platter. This had the eerie feeling of a Humphrey Bogart movie. We felt like hiding under the sheets like naughty children inviting the mysteries of the night to haunt us. A wild surge of giddyness engulfed us. This was when the spell broke and the hysteria peeked and then subsided and we realized that we were deep in a predicament that was very real and very palpable and that nothing that our imaginations could construe would be too far from becoming true.

Our treat each day was basking in the afternoon sun on the roof terrace. We spoke little about our adoption to the couple from Boston, only to say that things were going as predicted. We were joined at the hotel by a number of other families from Minnesota, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Washington, D.C.. They

would convene on the roof at the end of their days in court or at some other agency as they moved through the adoption process. The couple from Minnesota were adopting twin boys with bright red hair who were born near the border of Argentina. One of the babies seemed to have a rather severe cough. The doctor had diagnosed it possibly as whooping cough. We really were living in another time zone. Back in the States people had not had the board of health hammering warning signs on their doors about such a disease for decades. Confined to silence, we dared not share our near brush with syphilis. This was unlike me to remain uncommunicative and not to share as a way of reaching out. We were mysterious because we seemed more like guests on holiday than adoptive parents. By evening each day we were overcome with feelings of jealousy and envy as each couple recounted their experiences of the day and how they were one step closer to mounting a plane and returning home as a family. No one questioned us. I imagine our demeanor was thankfully forbidding. Each couple shared stories of the anxieties their lawyers held while negotiating through this potentially treacherous time for adoptions. Birth certificates had even been burned in some courthouse as a warning of the internal discontent. We formed a community of comfort.

Our babies circled us in their carriages as we exchanged warm stories of back home. We took photos of each other's babies and shared addresses promising to keep in touch. Occasionally we would meet in the hotel playroom and sit on the floor rattling toys at our infants. One couple from Florida were adopting a two year old. The woman was seven months pregnant. As is common, after waiting ten years to have a child they finally decided to adopt and after identifying a two year old and finalizing the paperwork the woman conceived. She would just be settling at home when the baby would arrive having a ready made older sibling. Occasionally I would think of the first little child as I watched him play with blocks or trucks. Would we have been in the same situation if we had been quick and decisive

enough to have negotiated that? But then we wouldn't have Luca, and there could not have been a life without him.

From the inane to the casual we tried to fill up our days so that we could keep frantic and dislodging emotions at bay. Books became great friends and consolers. When we were not feeding Luca or sleeping we were reading. The week got to Friday until we heard from Antonio again. He appeared without warning late Friday afternoon without Jorge. He informed us that he was coming for us the next day, Saturday at noon and that we were to have all of our things ready for we would be leaving the hotel and moving in with him. With his rudimentary English he communicated this well. He did not brief us on the status of our case but we gathered it was caught up in the quagmire of the court system and at a stand still by the invitation. Nearing the end of our stay at this little oasis, this corner of Germany in the heart of Latin America, we realized that our forbearance was about to shred. The intermittent calling of room service at our door with the necessary boiled water was becoming intolerable. This Friday night found us sleepless. We packed our bags and waiting impatiently for the morning to come.

Chapter 12

Not to be daunted, we had a final breakfast in the hotel dining room. Many of our hotel friends were there astride with infants. We said nothing of the fact that we were leaving at midday with our lawyer to take up residence at his house. Promptly at noon Antonio appeared. He had our things brought down from our room and helped us get our bill paid. He retrieved the papers he had left of ours at the desk and to the one entrusted hotel employee he gave his telephone number and address. During the brief calls home, we had informed everyone that things were going according to schedule. That meant that we were expected back on the following Saturday. We decided to wait until we were safely at Antonio's house to begin to fill in the family on the details of the treachery and uncertainty to which we were now being exposed.

We were in this with Antonio, frozen into place, up to our ears. Like bedrock he did not seem to be abandoning us, but seemed to be carrying on in a fastidious and logical manner, with a plan! He was out the limb with us and offered us board and upkeep at his new home for the duration of our stay. Through our language barrier, he continued to reassure us, "No problem", that we just needed more time, more time. "No problem," we came to understand meant that he did not anticipate anything catastrophic happening and that there was a "solution" to this. We just had to entrust ourselves to him and be patient and allow him to proceed. In this country of strangeness, he became our flesh and blood.

Since our meeting with Antonio and the knowledge that we had encountered turbulent legal waters, our swings of emotion had been like shifting tidal sands. We plotted a series of plans to appease the revolutions of our panic. These contrapuntal escapes in the blackened Latin American night through the treacherous jungle terrain crossing over borders into Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia,

made us bemoan our skimpy, ill-informed knowledge of the region. How arrogant of us to have journeyed to bring a child into our a family without detailed tracts of information about Paraguay and all the neighboring countries. Now hostage of a legal system beyond our grasp, we were dependent like school children on a lawyer who was brusquely moving us through the Saturday afternoon streets of Asuncion to his home, where we would live as his guests. Informed by Antonio that he was the only member of his family who spoke English, we saw that we were sinking further into the unknowable and the unknown. He kept glimpsing at us and smiling reassuringly as we sat there among our belongings clutching onto each other and Luca. We wondered if we would ever get back to the unqualified zig-zagging openness we had felt in those first few brief days before the hammer of Paraguayan justice had knocked us off balance. Would we ever let our hearts fly so far out of our bodies again to forge this three way union? Would we ever be as open, as raw, as loving? Had they snuffed out the the momentum, taken the sail out of our wings? We were being stalwart, impervious, and functioning. But the texture, the unspoken, that which makes us more than mere animals was gone.

I had been warned as a young woman of a tendency I had to relinquish my energy to the airless, the flawless, and the bloodless, to go into automatic and perform, just perform. Someone suggested once that my tombstone would read, "Here lies Naomi. She functioned well." Did I want to sacrifice what pulsed because of an inordinate fear of loss? Now under the weight of possible loss would we retreat from this baby, our son, allowing our feelings for him to dry up, remembered relics, fossilized because we couldn't jump into a life of the tenuous and treacherous if for a while. Would we again let ourselves experience that fragile and expansive tenderness and love that had been forming? We were for all intents and purposes being ordered to move in with Antonio, our lawyer. In his little red Chevette, he whisked us deeper into the unknown. Our tolerance would be the

measure of our love for this baby.

For reasons we didn't know, Jorge, was no longer around. We had to jump at each other through gestures, signals, dictionaries, and good will. We were reduced to primitivisms, language poor, in as intricate a situation as we had known. Both of us were individuals reliant on language as our first line of defense, as our main tool of knowing, and as our greatest weapon. Language was our sport. Talk was how we drained resentment from building up like sediment on the walls of our relationship. Silences were times we learned to trust. And now it was as if access to words were drying up even to communicate to one another. This baby on our laps juggled around by the bumpy motion of the car was our son, so quickly had we let him vine around our hearts. Passports, borders, nations were not after all just ideological recriminations. A passport was a fact. It existed. It indeed was necessary. To cross arbitrary boundaries one needed that piece of paper. Territories, boundaries, borders, nations, nationalism all took on another hue and character for me as we drove through this city.

How did flesh get formalized in that way? How did territory get federalized, sanctioned? Why did we have such involuntary and pressing urges to separate and divide ourselves in this way? Distinctions based on the external and therefore arbitrary have always been abhorrent to me. At twelve I had written a letter to the editor of the Newark Evening News excoriating our country for what had happened to Emmett Till. I had said I didn't want to be an American, that I couldn't believe in an America in which that kind of racism had happened. I said I would never again trust anything that was taught me in school because of that event. Further that my being Jewish and white would not keep me, separate me from others and deny me open access to relationships of all kinds. This rebellion, this outrage had been ingrained. Early on I was brought by my father not to abide intolerance drawn by racial or ethnic or cultural lines. That prejudice of any kind needed to be spoken out

against no matter the consequence. As I matured my feelings extended into an anti-nationalism. I resisted a fervor in which a flag could govern and therefore limit a way of existing in the world. But never did I really believe or think one nation could keep us from bringing home a person legally recognized as a son.

From the lofty to the insane, my thoughts rambled as I tried to grasp for the familiar, something to anchor me to our present circumstance. I was so frightened of fraying, dissembling. One cannot break a mother from a child. That feeling kicked in with the force of an intense quake. Suddenly I knew that my life could no longer have any meaning without this child, and along with that condition of mothering the wakening knowledge that if a choice had to be made between my life and that of his, Luca's, there could be no choice to make. So quickly and undeniably had Luca fastened to the bed rock of our lives, our existence. The little red car pulled to a stop. I was exhausted and worn down by the circuitry of feeling and thought that had filled my ride. Frank's face wore a similar expression of world weariness. We were close in our speechlessness.

Chapter 13

We were at Antonio's new home. He was obviously proud of this house. One thing about Antonio, it was always easy to know what he thought or felt. Everything was in his face and his motion. It was explicit. That was part of his charm. That was what made him so compelling. He existed with a aura of full expression, in which everything was disclosed, including the impenetrability, the depth, the range, and the fact that he "knew", he always "knew". "Do you know because I tell you, or do you just know?", that the last line of Gertrude Stein's libretto for Virgil Thomas's opera "The Mother of Us All." Antonio just knew! Our confidence and trust stayed when we connected to that. Our panic and unease was kept at bay when we lived at surface with him. The house seemed to be a statement, a very important expression of himself.

It appeared to be in an attractive, and prospering neighborhood. Antonio looked toward us and we told him how nice we thought it was. He smiled widely, gratified at our appreciation. Without false modesty and restraint, he urged us out of the car quickly. We walked through a gate at the side of the house and around to an enclosed red- tiled courtyard. There were abundant yellow flowers bordering the tiles and a high stucco wall enclosing the space. Off the courtyard were a series of rooms. There was an elevated section at the back of the courtyard in which there was another of those open hearth ovens and an additional living quarter. We were surrounded by children and women who stood in the background as Antonio's wife greeted us and took the baby almost immediately from my arms. Frank stood back with Antonio as I followed Antonio's wife through the kitchen and into a room immediately off to the side in which there were two narrow beds and what appeared to be a handcrafted cradle suspended from a wooden frame which was draped by a pale green mesh mosquito net edged in delicate lace. She smiled warmly at me and

placed Luca into what was to be his gently swaying bed. Luca looked like a prince. He was comfortably and deeply asleep. His body looked relaxed and at home in his little bed. The antiseptic metal hotel crib was a thing of the past. There would be no more waiters bringing boiled water for his formula. We were joined by two other women. One could feel the air light up with a rapturous and fierce and immediate female bonding. Without formal language, we had come together around an indisputable desire and need to nurture and protect Luca.

Antonio and Frank joined us. Antonio told us that these were his sisters-in-law, one of whom we glimpsed the day we arrived. Estelle asked Antonio to bring in Luca's belongings. Immediately the sisters began going through them and carefully examining each item. They were particularly taken with his medicines. Luca was already half-way through a dose of an antibiotic, Eritroland, prescribed by the pediatrician to protect him from getting a case of whooping cough because of his exposure to the infant at our hotel. They seemed to be greatly distressed by strong the medication. My early reticence and limited vocabulary in Spanish made it impossible to explain why he was taking it. I therefore had to field the brunt of this displeasure. Immediately I knew that I would have to call the pediatrician conversant in English and Spanish to do some explaining to them. Quickly I was beginning to sense that I was in a configuration of mothers by committee, all of us sharing and feeling responsible for the well-being of this baby.

My past experience as a new mother had been one of extreme isolation and its concomitant autonomy. I had never before been interconnected or interdependent, or able to rely on others to help me decode and respond to infant screams and cries. Suddenly I was in a sisterhood of mothers and I knew that as we had yielded ourselves to Antonio, so would I have to merge and blend and bend with these three women. Estelle took further command of the situation and brought me into the kitchen where she tried to teach me how to light her stove so that I could boil

the necessary water for the baby's formula. She pointed to the thermos I had brought with me and to a pan with water. Whether from fatigue or a fear of blowing up the house, I resisted learning how to do this. Not wanting to make me uncomfortable, she dropped this lesson for another time.

We were joined by four children, Antonio and Estelle's sons, who smiled up at me with recognition, and two girls about eleven and sixteen. Estelle pointed to the other women and I gathered each girl belonged to one of them. The smaller little boy was sucking on a baby bottle filled with Coca Cola presumably given to provide comfort, I thought without judgement. The children quickly moved off in synchronicity. They were like flocking geese, moving in perfect chronological order or ascendance. They moved in and out of the rooms and courtyard. Not one adult stepped forward to tell them to either quiet or slow down.

Frank and I were in different spaces, he with Antonio, and me encircled by the women. Not long after our arrival, as if to test the waters, Luca wakened and went on a severe crying jag. We had never heard him cry so loudly or with such desperation before. Perhaps he too had known that he had to live in hushed tones in the exposed and potentially dangerous realm of the hotel. Now he was making up for lost time, bellowing furiously and miserably. I was unable to even get to him. A maze of female arms reached out to soothe and comfort him. Antonio's sisters'-in-law took over, they rocked him, sang to him, put some drops they had in his ears. A conglomerate of nurturers with no apparent way for me to intervene or stop them. Without a common language, Frank and I were able to just look on believing there was a universality to mothering which at this point had taken over and needed to be trusted and regarded with respect.

On our first night in residence at Antonio's, there was a birthday party. The one of Antonio's sisters-in-law we had met before had become thirty-six. In honor of her birthday they held a barbecue with meats, yucca, Scotch, and beer. There was a

lot of laughter, an incessant roar of children, with more cousins appearing. We were given space and room to settle in, and were not forced to participate. We were not exposed to the kind of interrogation that usually accompanied being a guest in a home. We were grateful for the language difference. Although we again wondered, we neither had sufficient proficiency in Spanish nor the ease to ask Jorge's whereabouts. We hoped he would come by in a day or two to enlighten us about the specifics of our predicament.

Later during the party, we sat in the courtyard cradling the baby and settling into the shadows of the comfortable night air. Frank's eyes followed the sister for whom the birthday party was being given. She was comely, beautifully built, with long hair, high cheek bones, flared nostrils, and appeared to be more sexually alive than the other sisters who were both rounder and more matronly. Even here in the night time of Paraguay, rocking our son to sleep, a razor like pain divided my near complacency. My age reared up like a stampeding horse. I was reminded of Frank's and mine nearly eight year age difference. Niggling in on the night was a recurrent fear that Frank would find someone with a razor sharp jaw line whose body was firm like an ocean whittled rock - and abandon me.

My eyes often averted when I saw my reflection - my chin looking like a cookie bag of lumps and crumbs. I would never be able to inoculate myself against the pervasiveness of these insidious thoughts. And although Frank was most often careful not to reinforce these negative feelings, tacitly I knew he often mused about having someone just plainly and chronologically younger. My tenuous feelings of inner balance and security suddenly were thrown off. How at a time of such inscrutable and pervasive danger did I allow myself such a self-deprecating indulgence? Could my female ego be so easily thrown into such jealousy and remorse as a result of an appreciative or aroused male stare? To dim and diminish the insecurity which was building in me at bullet speed, I focused on Antonio's

wife, Estelle.

She appeared like a cross between an arch law professor, the austere and stern principal of a large day school, the rump full wife of a petty bureaucratic functionary, and the wife of a burly and textured man. I saw she was alert, drawn to details - careful, observant, persistent. Finding me settled in the darkened folds of night, she pushed on through our language barrier, persistent on getting to know me, and to instructing me about the house. She was probing to see what my limitations were in terms of being able to handle our needs and those of the baby. She laughed repeatedly in a strong and robust manner. We were to be equals, I as more than a guest, and she as less than an encompassing caretaker and host. I could see that she did not find me an oddity, or a curiosity piece.

Rather we were clients of her husband's with a particular problem and she as his partner had to assure our comfort and well-being. She was bluntly and clearly pragmatic - all business. As Antonio waded ploddingly through the legal maze, so would she keep us safe, secure, comfortable, and fed. Estelle was gratefully easy to read. My responses, were the tables turned, would have been diametrically different. I eschewed anything that resounded of the pragmatic. I, almost self-righteously, wanted always to be instructed by the heart. Finally the party was over. The children still up and around were escorted to bed. The cousins left. We were bid a warm and hearty goodnight. Antonio escorted us to our room shaking Frank's hand and kissing me on the cheek. Another flurry of emotions scattered about me. I felt that pinch in the heart, that quickening that comes when one is falling in love.

As I lay in the sliver thin a bed across the room from Frank, the baby asleep between us in his net covered cradle, I tried to touch, feel, smell, reason with the reality, the realness of all of this. We were now tucked away in a home on the edges of Asuncion, joined as parents, getting to know our new son, waiting for a process to be culminated. We had been assured by Antonio that Luca's birth mother had freely

and without coercion given him up for adoption, that his papers had all been judiciously and legally processed, and most significantly that the judge who performed our adoption had decided to stand by his decision in the face of all the opposition.

I had not gathered the significance of that last statement until now. The judge had asked that we swear under oath to educate Luca well. The man who had called me back to ask my age had decided to stand by us and his decision no matter what the cost. Antonio's confidence in a positive resolution of the case was founded on that declaration by the judge. I wanted to share my deepening understanding of our case with Frank, to piece it together with him but he was asleep very quickly. Reasserting itself beyond question was the fact that we were firmly, squarely, and legally Luca's parents, and that he never had nor would have any other, that he was ours, and we were his. This reality was now set for me as by a foundry in iron. My sleep was gauze-like waiting for Luca to wake. I did not want him to disturb the household with his cries. I was afraid that the sisters would pile into the room and take control. I had to begin asserting myself and showing myself as someone competent or I would be subsumed, overtaken, relegated to a lesser role. I believed in my bones, beyond doubt that Antonio was a wily and clever tactician with an intricate knowledge of his country. If we were to be freed from the tyranny of all of this, Antonio was up to doing it. Luca was to be connected to us by a commitment more profound, more exacting than that given with most vows. His initiation into the world was to be at the center of a quest.

There had been fleeting discussion about us both leaving Luca with Antonio and giving him full "power-of- attorney" and then returning to Paraguay to fetch him when the case was resolved. Barely the first dark had lifted and I knew I couldn't abide by that plan. Perhaps Frank would return home if the case dragged on and I would stay with Luca. I could not and would not leave his mothering in

the sole province of the sisters. My covetous heart could not stand undoing the bonds that would form or the competition. It became clear to me that one of us needed to return home. That one of us had to be out of this impenetrable and frightening country to monitor what was going on. And that since I could not conceive of leaving the baby that Frank would have to be the one to go. At home, Frank could make contact with the friend in Washington who worked in the State Department. Further Frank could maintain a necessary continuity in our lives, and reassure Rebecca and Jeremy and our families that everything would in due time be positively resolved. His presence could provide a ballast - stabilizing our families, our work situations and most importantly he could continue on schedule with his dissertation. His pursuit of a Ph.D. had been central to our lives. Our relationship would be greatly strained if there was a severe disruption of his work. More than likely my being older and more experienced, enabled me to often grasp the difficult and potentially onerous permutations of situations and decisions first. Through a feeding, through the dawn, my mind spun. Like Molly Bloom my mind was a succession of punctuationless thoughts, an endless flow of the unconscious. I was grasping things with tornado-like speed and veracity. Within this tapestry of thought, this quilting of all the levels of our combined and current realities I moved through the night. I had to exert enormous personal control not to spew out my found insights intemperately to Frank. He would recoil at the gestalt of my night crafted thoughts if they were hurled at him in one piece. I had learned. I had learned the art of pacing and patience. Baby on chest, Frank joined us in the new morning. I smiled, we kissed, and I said nothing.

Fortuitous, Antonio gingerly suggested later in the morning in a sort of conference with us that one of us should stay here with Luca until the case was resolved. He said it would be better to have me stay because the courts, should we have to personally appear, would look more favorably on seeing the mother. He

said that he did not know and could not tell exactly when this would all be resolved, but that he firmly believed it would be solved favorably. Out of grave necessity, we had learned to comprehend beyond our language barrier.

Frank and I excused ourselves and sat in our room talking. The sisters were playing with Luca in the courtyard. Hesitantly, I suggested to Frank that he return to the States as soon as possible. It was increasingly evident that it was counterproductive for both of us to remain here. Frank could leave knowing that I was safe and being well taken care of. He was equally aware that we had no alternative but to rely and entrust our fate to Antonio. And rather than cause further alarm in our families or to jeopardize our work situations or to let too much of our lives and paperwork and bills lapse into a miserable confusion, it would be better for him to return sooner than later. In less than two day's time, the next plane would be leaving from Asuncion to Miami bringing Frank home almost a week before expected. My mother drawn to the cataclysmic could be calmed down. Most importantly Jeremy and Rebecca could be filled in on the full details of the situation. Speaking in muted tones, each absorbing the weight of the decision being forged, we saw no alternative to this plan. Given the fact that there were only two planes departing a week for the United States, one on Tuesday and one on Saturday, we immediately left the room and to ask Antonio to arrange for Frank to leave on Tuesday. Fortunately, he was able to make a reservation on Air Paraguay. With a big pleased smile, as if we had once again met the test, he asked if we wouldn't enjoy joining him and his family for a Sunday outing in the country.

Chapter 14

Having been unable to quiet my nearly runaway mind since we left the hotel I was relieved that Antonio had asked us to join with him and his family for an unencumbered time together in the countryside. Our families would have further time to get acquainted and to share another experience. I would have a chance out of the house to get to know Estelle better and to continue fostering a mutually compatible relationship. Now that it was clear and decided that I would stay behind and that Frank would be soon leaving, it became an imperative for us to be comfortable with each other. Plans for alternatives that had been rumbling around within me were given rest, my immediate destiny was carved out. I was always best when I understood the circumference of things and could consider the details or underpinnings. I was a warrior when set to strategies and plans. My reach was great, my taste for survival nearly inordinate. A problematic time with Frank had occurred when on a trip to Scotland. He insisted we traverse a mountain far too difficult for me to do anything but look at. Ultimately I was left to crouch, a bird with a broken wing, while Frank continued his exploration of the area. It was one of the few times of my life that I could find no alternative but to shrivel and hulk into my fear which became a borderless panic.

The mental gymnastics which had been erupting in me nearly without control suddenly ebbed as our two families packed up and piled into the car map in hand for a Sunday excursion. It almost was if we were extended family participating together in the routine and ritualized. Luca, Estelle, the two boys and I were seated snugly together in the backseat of the little red Chevette, the men were up front. The littlest son, Juan, sucked on his bottle of Coca Cola as the car set in motion. Like a turtle I had practically everything Luca owned with me prepared for any exigencies. Since the divorce, Rebecca had always carried everything she owned as

she travelled from house to house, visitation right to visitation right. Watching her depart with her belongings, this little itinerant who was my daughter would devastate me as if to rub my face hard into my decision to leave her father. Never did I blunt the feeling of remorse and sadness as I would watch her come and go on under the weight of her satchels filled with all her worldly possessions. Now I was encumbering Luca in the same way. In this land of the unexpected, I could leave no piece of him behind anywhere or at any time.

If Estelle and Antonio noticed the bulky, overstuffed diaper bag they never said a word. Perhaps they understood my need to have all of him together in one place. Antonio put on his Julio Iglesias tape as we drove beyond the outskirts of the City to a lake side resort named San Bernardino. The landscape along the way was flat and not particularly picturesque or inviting, scarce and interspersed here and there were small groups of houses with people sitting around road front yards. The vegetation was sparse and the soil rather dry and impoverished. In the few road side towns we came through stall-like stores displayed brightly colored spider webbed wall hangings, along with hand woven hammocks, and some hand woven blankets. Antonio and Estelle kept asking if we wanted to stop to purchase anything. When we declined they appeared dismayed and hurt at our not wanting to have any of their native wares as souvenirs. Ultimately we asked to stop at such a store where we all got out. I don't know why we resisted. Perhaps it was just to have a say over something. These hand-woven crafts were very beautiful, we settled on a lovely traditional hand woven blanket. Antonio, very much a negotiator, stepped in and got the price reduced considerably.

After about a twenty-five mile drive we reached our destination. At first sight, it looked like Southampton on Long Island, where portentous estates draped the landscape. It resembled other lavish and exclusive resorts established for the very rich near a big city. The town was situated along a very large and beautiful

lake. For the first time since we had arrived, we found a place to which one could ascribe an aesthetic. There was definitely something captivating and poetic about the lake. As is often the case, the rich had taken a place of natural beauty for themselves. This was the first time since we had arrived that we had seen any evidence of real wealth. The houses had pools, tennis courts, and elaborate outdoor barbecues. Since it was winter, most of the houses were closed up. On the occasional restaurants and hotels we passed were the words, "Man spricht Deutsch". The second language of Paraguay at least in San Bernardino was German.

I winced and swallowed hard wanting to suppress the scream that was creeping up my insides. Who were these Germans holidaying deep in the bowels of Latin America? Was this another site for their "druch nach suden?" Or were these the escapees from Nazi Germany who given safe harbor had never bothered to learn Spanish? An incredible reality kept mounting, not only were Luca's papers being held up, but Germans were abundant and dominant in this country. Paraguay a landlocked country which did not encourage tourism had extended a hand to a group who were probably despicable renegades. I would never hold up, I felt my courage and stamina drain out of me as we toured through the town. Antonio and Estelle seemed so proud of the town's opulence and beauty. This was no different than the excitement and proprietary feelings I often had experienced while giving guided tours of the wealthy parts of Manhattan. Estelle and Antonio seemed inured to the German signs.

As if dumped into my stupefied mind, I began to think of Paraguay as a country of nothing. The scenery for the most part was drab and undistinguished. Up until now we could find no evidence of theater, music, or literature. The sole movie theater in Asuncion was playing "Rambo I and II". We had learned from Antonio, who shared the information almost boastfully, that the Guarini Indian were now recognized for their historical contribution to Paraguayan culture and that

students were now taught Guarini in school. Paraguay it was becoming clear, was primarily a country of families of children, parents, uncles and aunts and grandparents. Frank, Luca, and I were being welcomed into that configuration. Touring in a singularly beautiful spot, the auslander held reign.

We had the resort practically all to ourselves on this balmy and glistening Sunday in the winter season. Along with us, wading in and out of the shore, were a few like-minded families, some campers, and some Indians selling crafts and sweet donut-like rolls. Antonio treated us to the glazed sweetened rolls. Antonio and his sons splashed around the shallows, tossing in rocks and stones, like many a father and their young on such an outing. Estelle and I fussed over the baby, feeding him, changing him, watching him. Frank wandered between us distant, preparing mentally to leave, I thought. Antonio, the boys, and I went for a row. Very much out of character, I took Antonio's invitation and rowed us around for a substantial amount of time. He looked at my effort, rough and clumsy at best, with amusement. The sun, a red ball of fire, ended the day. Antonio watched as I did, "We are sharing a second sunset," I noted. He looked over at me curiously.

On the way home, Antonio picked up some empanadas for our evening meal. Take-out food, particularly meats, it was becoming apparent, were a mainstay of many meals. Back in the house, I tried to slip Luca off to bed. Estelle informed me that he must be bathed first. I replied, "Tomorrow morning". She, disregarding me, filled a small tub with water, undressed him and holding him like a football proceeded to clean his body, head to toe, with soap and water. I had been totally countermanded and disregarded, the first of many times. I was one of a line of mothers caring for this child. I did not need to speak or understand Spanish to gather this.

Luca, sparkling and sweet smelling, was returned for me to put him to bed. Again, alone with me, he got balkish, and refused to sleep. It was his first show of

temper and willfulness. Frank and I circled our little room with the air vent open to the rest of the house into which spilled Luca's sobs and our attempts to comfort him. Frank was testy and tense. We began to bicker. He was leaving in less than two days. I was very tired and trying to digest my present fate. Frank commented as he swept by me taking his turn circling with the baby, "Maybe you could learn about being a mother here". The words reached into me like an angry claw. Perhaps we had to part angry, or be angry to part. A fault was forming, a fissure. The land was separating, leaving me in this land-locked country for an as yet unspecified period of time. Yes, we were to be left behind, Luca and I.

The next day I asked the pediatrician to visit with us in Estelle's home. I wanted him to give instructions in Spanish and English to all of us involved in mothering Luca. I wanted him to discuss why he had prescribed the medicine Luca was taking, what Luca should eat and drink and how often, and any other pertinent information he felt it necessary for us to know in order for us to coordinate our care. The pediatrician readily consented. The women seemed pleased at the idea and opportunity to confront him directly. It was evident to me that in order for all of us females to synchronize and coordinate our care we had to have some common information as a foundation. We had to get beyond instinct and old wives tales to function smoothly and carefully otherwise our attentions would be subverted by each other. Further my inability to be conversant in Spanish could be used as was common as an excuse to ignore me and ride herd. I wanted the pleasure of this enjoining of mothering hands, and not for my energies or forbearance to be further worn away by contradictory baby care.

Frank and Antonio went off to a greenmarket while the pediatrician visited. He gathered us around him and holding Luca who was charmed and mesmerized discussed why Luca was on medication, what his weight and height were, what he should eat and how often, and that he would be available any time we had

questions. Each statement he made in Spanish he repeated in English. The women raised issues which he apparently answered satisfactorily. After nearly an hour, he excused himself. The visit with the pediatrician had been an unqualified success. All of the sisters seemed even more determined to perform as ancillary mothers.

Upon their return, Antonio blended some fresh apple juice for Frank and me and for Luca. It was delicious. I was subjected during the course of the afternoon, to the women, sisters, or other mothers as I now thought of them pulling apart, like carded wool, the pediatrician's recommendations. He had not relieved them of some of their concerns. They believed the baby was too young for fruits and vegetables, recommended by him, and with this I agreed. He believed Luca should be given no additional antibiotics when this dose was finished. They felt it should be terminated immediately. On this point I had to hold firm, knowing that it was not wise to interrupt a prescribed dosage of antibiotics. It seemed almost parapsychic but I was able to understand or interpret what the women were saying whenever they spoke about the baby, although almost at all other times I drew a blank.

Dinner time was festive and familial. Pochi, the sister who had just celebrated her birthday, received a visit from her estranged husband. He informed us that he came nearly every day to visit with his daughter and that he was a chemist. He spoke English modestly, having spent six months studying English at Cambridge University in England. Since Jeremy had just graduated from Cambridge University, this gave us some welcomed common ground. Somebody had entered our lives here who could converse in English and who had spent time as we had in Cambridge, England. However it was clear from the way in which Antonio hovered about us that it was totally inappropriate and out of order to use this estranged brother-in-law to translate or enlighten us. Here in captivity the rules of the game were explicit and unyielding. We could never relax our vigilance even in the bosom of family. When Antonio got that erect taut posture it meant that we were to

retreat, to be passive and to be silent.

Reality blistered upon us. Our insularity was interrupted by a phone call from Rebecca who interrogated us with an astuteness, a sensitivity, and a concern that rumbled through my head like a disconnected tremor, verging on tumbling, an avalanche of emotion that could in an instant dislodge me and drown my poise and warp my forbearance. She wanted details, specifics. Like a trained inquisitor, she demanded to know exactly what the situation was - and did not want to be shielded or kept from one detail. How to explain the unexplainable being truthful but not alarming was all but impossible. I was unnerved as she questioned, challenged. She reawakened who I was in me, that I was, "Her mother too!" The tenderness surged through me as I heard those words springing from the deepest bed of maternal instinct and craving. My arms trembled, were tortured by their inability to encircle and comfort my rightfully concerned and worried child. Having received word from Frank's parents that we were at the lawyer's house, she took it upon herself to call. When I told her lightly and off-handedly that Frank would be returning home tomorrow and that I would be staying behind with the baby for a week or so she with trembling voice had begun her interrogation. Raise children to question and they question. Raise them to demand the truth and they demand it. Perhaps the phone was tapped Antonio once again stood near by. I kept reasserting reassuringly that I was fine, that I was in very good hands and that I couldn't wait to share the baby with her. Luca, I told her, was truly the baby of our dreams. "Remember I need you too," she said almost inaudibly as she hung up the receiver.

The phone replaced, I looked for Luca to ground me again. He was being pushed around in his carriage by the boys. Yta, the other sister, then snuggled with him. They took him to watch TV. and he dozed and fell off to sleep without a whimper. Frank was in the room preparing for his departure the next day. I looked up at a blank black sky to resituate myself, to come back, to regain my composure

and control. I have never liked remote times, imposed or otherwise, to be interrupted by phone calls. There had been times when I had been alone that I had taken the phone off the hook for an entire weekend. Now the phone became an intolerable tool of invasiveness. I would be almost better without any personal access to any other reality. I needed isolation in my insularity. My partnership with Luca would suffice to console and toughen me. Everything else was beyond my control, out of my reach. Gingerly I would have to ask Frank to tell me little of back home when he called. I could contend with nothing more than comments like, everyone was well. I also needed protection from probing calls. I couldn't wait for him to get back there to mute the phone. Frank was by now so preoccupied with leaving that we had no time or emotional space to discuss Rebecca's call.

Later in the evening another baby arrived for a visit. This tiny person, little more than two weeks old, was waiting to be adopted and living with one of Antonio's law assistants whose wife was serving as the foster nanny. I thought that this was the baby who was born the day we arrived. I learned that recently Antonio had had three infants in residence in his immediate families' care while waiting their adoptive parents processing and arrival. I was beginning to see that Antonio had designed his existence to harbor and tend to infants as they awaited adoption. Indeed this household had been established to serve as a sort of way station for abandoned babies. His wife and her two sisters were employed as foster nannies. Antonio had developed a sort of cottage industry, a baby stop. Law assistants and other friends were also included in this aspect of the business. The new house purchased with money earned from this flourishing adoption business had more than likely been selected because of its suitability for these purposes.

I saw that while I was in residence mine would be an extra hand to care for Luca and that I was in fact a mother in foster care. This was in fact a business for this family and I was a client. These insights were left unshared with Frank. In my

mind he already had moved on. I tried not to get upset as my understanding of the situation became clear. I had to live whole and could not further disassemble my predicament. In our slice thin beds we said little this last night together, each of us afraid to leave a bad taste, grist for resentment. My mother would always throw me out of the house each day for school in a state of turmoil and torment. Never did I leave the house once not being in tears. Only later did I come to understand that the only way she could let me leave, part from me, was to drive me out hurling cruel epithets. I did not want to be my mother's daughter. I did not want to goad Frank or to have him feel foolish, guilty, or unmanly for leaving me behind. We murmured some muffled pleasantries about being one and waited for the day light. Luca awakened once and whimpered modestly, drank his formula and returned to sleep almost aware that he should also appear calm.

I was sucking on, drinking from an airplane size bottle of Remy Martin I took with me from the Hotel Cecilia and tucked among my belongings for a moment like this one. Tuesday afternoon, 1:30, September 6, 1988, Frank had just left for the airport to take off for the United States leaving me behind with our son Luca. A bird, as if wound up, beaked rhythmically on the window, the baby slept and I was a little teary. Estelle had told me to go in and rest. She was aware that I needed a little time, quiet and distance to settle in and absorb my new status which rolled through my head like the scrolled music tapes on a player piano monotoned and without modulation.

I was held up waiting a decision from a court representing arbitrary law and absolute government, in a country which was a haven for outlaws and renegades, for murderers and tyrants, fugitives of a netherworld so repulsive and frightening so alarming as to be almost beyond grasp. This country of Native Indians and early Spanish settlers was host to the refugees of flight that were leading military officers and engineers of mass destruction, they lived here freely and well. This was a host

country to Germans, Germans of World War II, Germans who believed in a manifest destiny of the superior, of a master race. The absolute dictator and President of Paraguay for more than thirty-five years now had a German surname, Stroessner. And although his family pre-dated World War II, they had helped pave the way as a haven of despicable notoriety. These were not innocent settlers fleeing religious oppression or economic privation or starvation, these were guests, welcomed guests of the government. These were the people who chose to act beyond the circle of human decency and mutual consent.

Streaming in these thoughts seized me as I licked the last sip from the tiny bottle. My Judaism lived in an uneasy alliance within me. For the most part denied or relegated to the unresolved, I lived by intention without formal religion. Grudgingly I would drag the children to Seders at family members' homes to keep the peace, to appease. The children occasionally when they were little attended High Holiday services with my parents. My mother by this time of her life a rabid Jew had occasionally to be subdued, quelled, quieted or gotten off my back. In an act of open defiance I elected to send the children to a clergy run Episcopal school. I had justified the choice because of the school's affiliation with the socially alive and conscious Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in our neighborhood and the place in which Frank and I were married.

Perhaps I did long for some religious connection and had an attraction to Christianity. I did not probe this too deeply. For the most part, my mother's extreme reactions of distaste were sufficient justification. Parenthetically, my ex-husband and the children's father felt himself more a Christian than a Jew although a practitioner of neither. His father had come from straight unembellished Christian stock and his mother's family identified themselves as Berliner, and a-religious Jews. Suddenly with the force of a revelation my being Jewish splattered messily onto me. "Once a Jew always a Jew" my mother was wont to say. Antonio

had asked me quickly once in Jorge's presence if I wasn't Catholic. He never waited or expected an answer. I had been so caught up delineating our dilemma that I did not remember that until now. No, I wouldn't be one of those Jews on principle. No I wouldn't wear a yellow star. If they asked me if I were Jewish I would deny it. I would kill or die for this little baby. But I wouldn't uphold a commitment, keep a trust to my religion as a Jew and neither would my lovely, long dead, deeply religious grandma, my mother's mother, want me to.

Grandma

Rolling, shaking

White muslin

Delicate old lace

Her face;

Thick, knobbed hands

The dough

They handled, replaced;

Friday evening

No light yet

Tallow prayed

To old flickering

And God said,

"Let there be..."

And there was.

Grandma

Long braid

Teeth in place

The baker's wife

My mother's mother
Remembering God
Assuring Him
In His words
Of her love;
I watched
She never asked me to join
Never explained what she was doing
Or why:
Grandma, I now now
Who you were.

I plaintively thought of her. Was I in particular danger, was I endangering Luca's life or this family's because I was Jewish? Should Frank have been the one to stay behind because he was thoroughly and undeniably Catholic? One can never escape from being Jewish, Woody Allen had said in some movie. Being Jewish did haunt me like a bad trip, it was the monkey I could never get off my back. Nothing like confinement to unlock, to get down with a kind of intrepid honesty a free flow of uncensored thought.

I was holding Luca to steady me and reassure me. Startled razor clear I glimpsed this tiny thing, my son. Cymbals of clarity crashed in against any resistance. My heart melted, my sobs came hard. I loved this little child so already. No I didn't mind staying behind, a Jewish woman, to protect and take care of my adopted child while I waited for the resolution of the law case to leave with him safely tucked into my arms. And I had a person, a good person to defend and protect me. And I was happy on the bedrock of my unconscious self that this person was a man. Rescues from the near fatal seemed to override my basically ardent feminism

and neutering of all such aspects of life. And I trusted him absolutely and thoroughly. I could lick my wounds, indulge and contend with the mania of my thoughts. I was safe with him and my baby Luca was safe with me. I had chosen with both eyes opened wide to live with and marry Frank. This cumbersome, disturbing situation came from that choice. These events peculiar and unwieldy as they were came from the act, that act of choosing. I had to believe in and stand by my choice. My tenacity and perseverance in this situation would be evidence of that. "Dilsy, she endured." Those the last lines of "The Sound and the Fury," by William Faulkner. That would be my standard now. Replaying Rebecca's call I placed sleeping Luca back in his rustic crib and dozed off.

Chapter 15

What follows are the outpourings of my chronicled heart as they were written, as they were thought. Thus, began the dailiness of my life at Antonio's house. Unexpurgated. My line to safety, my pen. My distraction, my fascination, my thoughts as they happened in me and to me. I was for one of the few times in my life totally self-absorbed. Narcissistic. No one here could read English. I could sit unabashed in the open and write feverishly. No one did more than glance over curiously or to smile. I don't believe it was their acute sensitivity. Rather they were happy I was absorbed, occupied. They had limitless flow and energy and interest in the baby. Their tolerance for me was of the hospitable and out of necessity. We had to rev up energy to be together with our tools, our dictionaries. As long as I was fed, and our room and laundry attended to, they had fulfilled their obligation to me. My incessant writing relieved them of any need to entertain or contend with me. Luca was available to them at almost all times. Those were the ground rules. A door which I could close was for the most part respected although they did walk in if they had an urge to see the baby. The boys disregarded the door but fortunately they were not always around, interested or nearby.

The days settled in, I fed the baby every three hours or so, he got up squeezed his body together laughed and smiled then dozed. He fussed little but could work himself into real crying jags. Mornings we had sweet bread sticks and cafe-au-lait. At lunch times around noon, Antonio came home. We had roast chicken, or beef stew with polenta, or pasta with our equivalent of chili, and a salad lavished with an oil and vinegar dressing. I was given mineral water to drink. Dinner was usually at seven or eight, a mixed salad with empanadas or something else simple was served.

My shoulder erupted with pain, a weak point on my body, reacting to the

weight of this solid baby's head resting in the crook of my arm as he had his innumerable bottles. At times I was caught by a profound sadness because I was unable to nurse him as I did Jeremy and Rebecca. I often let him lick and suck at my breast after he ate. We both needed this kind of closeness. Where I got this natural motherliness in me I will never know. My mother's breasts were like two stones to me. She found my nursing first Jeremy and then Rebecca repulsive. Her face would contort with disgust when she caught me. At times I got the feeling that she was close to ripping the baby off my body with grief. Here Luca and I were free to lollygag about my breasts even if they could produce no milk. He seemed to have some form of recollection or memory for sucking although it already had lost its thrust having been unused and accustomed to the lesser rigors of bottle sucking. His little chest was a perfect fit between my breasts. Humming old baby hymns and lullabies I achieved a harmony and peace with him that could have only come in our confinement.

I was looking for the positive in this predicament. I had needed a good rest. I had needed to be alone with my own thoughts without the eminent presence or arrival of an intruder no matter how friendly or understanding. It was becoming a time of gathering, of taking stock. In many ways detainment of this kind was ideal, all of my needs were taken care of and it didn't pay to worry because intentional actions were prohibited and irrelevant. I did not plot an escape because it would have been counter productive and I couldn't conceive of how to do it. I had only to wait. I could not even be greatly bothered by daily facts or information concerning our case for none would be forthcoming. I could hear voices around me and rarely had to speak or respond. I could think or write what I wanted with no one looking over my shoulder including my past or my ghosts.

I was experiencing a kind of freedom I had had only once before when I was twenty-two during a time when I had inadvertently staged a ritual of passage. At

which time, I took up residence with a Navajo family hovering at the lip of a canyon in the Arizona desert. Within the family constellation in which I resided I found myself being freed of parts of a very unfulfilled past. In this family, I had found or crafted a woman, a mother to love me and raise me in a very truncated time and was thus set free from needing and desiring any more of that kind of love. This woman in whose hogan I lived became metaphorically to me, "She from whom my love comes."

Once again I was calling upon my mind to transfer a need - to create a palette of colors with which I could shape this onerous reality into something sustaining and internal. What would ultimately happen to me in this place, what was I now searching for? Into what vacuum was I stepping in order to be released? Poetry was not grabbing me - poems were not presenting themselves. Always before in times of fury or frustration or pain poems would fly off the ends of my hands having no will but to get a pen and write them down. Now a journal of free flowing thought was taking their place. My progressively profound and loving feelings for Luca resisted being attested to in a poem. I wondered was it that I was in a different space, or too unnerved to open up that source of emotion, or finally, too happy?

When I indulged images of home I suffered. Dangerously near the surface, I was coming to see, was an angry rush of emotion which spit out at Frank. Thoughts of money, my job, friends and family back home provoked binges of doubt and fury. I got into barely controllable frenzies of impatience and intolerance about the situation I found myself in. Verging on a kind of wildness, self-pity, randomly pacing, I would catch myself, throw myself into a book and read, or write up the days events almost as they occurred. By this I was subdued, calmed, made almost tranquil. But rage was the underbelly of this contentment. Presence of mind in this isolation rested in my being able to look outward, and to record what it was saw or thought. Thoughts of Jeremy and Rebecca, my big children, almost pieces of my

body, welled up such intense and aggravated feelings that I had to put them immediately to rest or be undone.

I remembered bitter, unresolved times like the recent Christmas, when Jeremy wept and Frank grabbed the sickle of control, finally having had enough of the exasperating comings and goings of these two children of divorce. Wanting to also be a visible presence, Frank pinned me between Jeremy's need to please both his parents and Frank's need for some uninterrupted time as a family. The anguish that came from this my first child brought home the absolute cruelty to children when their home splits up. This violent recollection closed in on me, events of the past were intruding randomly, toppling in like uninvited guests. I had trained myself with Jeremy when he was an infant to be fully and wholly attentive, to be entirely present in the sacred act of mothering. Language locked in Asuncion, Paraguay I discovered a new freedom in myself, the freedom of my thought, my pain, my recollections, uncensored, unmonitored and without witness. Being a stranger, unencumbered, gave me myself fully present. I did not leave pieces of myself in the cold - ungrowing, incubating, neurotic. Why did I have to be in the unfamiliar and unchallenging to come forth so unafraid, so fully alive? There was an undeniable sadness in this.

Estelle continued to be bothered by the fact that the baby was taking so much medicine. She tried to subvert the doctor, and told me not to give Luca anymore. I used the reigns of medical authority to stifle that request. There were a scant three or four days more left of the dosage. When Antonio had returned after taking Frank to the airport, he had gestured animatedly, "Bye,bye Frank," and pretended to kick him out of the house with a theatrical karate kick, he then kissed me explosively on the top of my head. Now you are all ours, he implied, completely and exclusively. And I was.

Pochi asked me, her estranged husband translating, "Was it hard to adopt a

baby in the U.S.A.?" Obviously, I sensed, they were each filled with questions. Pochi's had more of a curious edge. She was, I saw, becoming intrigued by me. I found myself exhausted and desirous of taking frequent naps. The family seemed to understand the level and extent of my fatigue. What else they understood or knew was not communicated to me. They seemed able to live in a world of unanswered questions. Probing or intruding were not within their repertoire. Was this a by-product of life in a dictatorship, taking things at face value or as they came, asking only to clarify the evident and present? Back home questions were often indulgences that had no respect for person, time, place, or age. Mouths could shoot off what they willed, invasions into the privacy of others often like yelping pups at the front door. Freedom to be nosey was something not available in Asuncion.

We were in a routine, dinners I was often left to eat alone or with different configurations of the family, perhaps only the boys, the girls, or a sister. Very often we were served the leftovers from lunch, the main meal of the day. I often neglected to ask which day of the week we were in. I was not that numbed but that protective of my fragile outer skin. I did not want my waiting to be demarcated by conventional markings of time. After dinner I often retired to my room to have some solitary, playful time with Luca. Even more than I anticipated, I was enjoying being a mother again. A baby was anchoring me. I was fully present. I looked at toes and fingers and small feet waving and marveled.

The sisters often sat around relaxing, drinking tea or matte, and having endless animated conversations with lots of good laughter. A rooster crowed incessantly somewhere out of sight but obviously in close proximity, and the two family dogs yelped and prowled the house at will. Sounds of a computer game often filled the atmosphere, a recent gift to Pochi's daughter Liis from her father. The dogs walked in and out, tracking into the house and extensive courtyard, dirt and mud. The house was constantly being scrubbed clean by the maid Carmen who

came at dawn every day but Sunday. The boys and dogs almost with intention waited for the floor to gleam and then spread their inevitable muddy tracks. No one seemed to mind and Carmen muffled her discontent behind their backs. Like a broad-shouldered peasant in a Van Gogh painting she stooped over and grimaced but never in their sight. I would catch it and she enjoyed entertaining me with this unconcealed discontent.

Who would think dogs could dominate so much thought, so much conversation? From what I could gather they were a mainstay woven into every conversation. The sisters would pull them on their laps, rub their bellies, tug playfully on their nozzles, and fall over themselves with unstoppable, irrepressible laughter. These were not small pups, one dog whose shank spilled over Estelle's lap was often referred to as her only daughter. The other a spindly legged, anorexic looking German shepherd with big sorrowful eyes cowered as if descended upon by a ghost whenever he saw me. This became a source of great hilarity for the entire family. His fright was equal to that of a child awakened abruptly by a nightmare. He slinked and backed away even at the sight of my shadow. "Vigilante pero!" Antonio said whenever he witnessed the dog's flight.

This power of mine to scare the family pet further endeared me to Antonio. I found him ruffling my hair or giving an affectionate pat to my back whenever this occurred. His playful touch sent shivers through me. He was irresistible. Thank god for things like the cowering dog to provide innocent and offhanded ways to be near him. But was I able to disguise my growing attraction to him? The simple and offhanded had always eluded me. Humour and laughter kept me buoyant. High drama and theatricality had been my staples, *sturm und drang* my metaphor. I had learned as a child to live with and accept the aggravated and unquiet. Quiet easy exchanges about nothing were beyond my grasp, my range, my experience. Part of what Frank offered me were easy times as he called them, unrestricted and

unplanned, and not particularly spectacular in their radiant and iridescent simplicity. "Can you live without a gun at your head?" "Can you live an ordinary life, one without high drama and emotional gymnastics?" a good friend once asked. Frank and I were building toward that. Here in Asuncion I was getting good practice.

When Luca awakened we often played a game. In this game I introduced the myriad and extensive list of things he did not know, sun, stars, bananas, ad infinitum. I was settling into a more humourous and light-spirited mode with him. He was enormously responsive and tickled by this. Whenever he was visited by the sisters, particularly Yta, and the boys, he gurgled as if with recognition. The boys often wheeled him around in his carriage. He had unequivocally and rapidly joined the family. One or another of the sisters invariably bathed him. And except at night, never more than an hour's time elapsed without a visit from one member of the family or another.

Carmen valiantly scrubbed and cleaned and scrubbed and cleaned the house inside and out as the children and dogs followed after her messing up. She mumbled to herself during her endless mopping. She was stockier than the other women, and seemed to have a more open, easy, and ready smile. She also left each day to some piece of the world outside. The sisters were here almost as adornments in the courtyard. Carmen was also extremely attentive to the baby. Occasionally when she found me alone or was cleaning our room she grabbed a dictionary and tried to exchange a few words in English with me. She did not conceal her curiosity. I sensed an urge in her to explore a reality beyond this one. She told me she had one child, a young son. Her big hands and broad hips were expansive. Although not servile she worked diligently and hard. Carmen went out of her way to express an individual and unique link to me. Kind gestures were like fallen rose petals, I tried to acknowledge her kindnesses.

Ubiquitous hummingbirds incessantly gathered nectar from the golden stalk-like flowers lining the courtyard wall. Hummingbirds had always held a particular fascination for me. In the lakeside country home in which Jeremy and Rebecca spent most of their early childhood summers, a hummingbird would fly among the petunias and geraniums abundantly planted annually in our window boxes. I believed beyond doubt that its iridescent blue feathers, diaphonous wings and needle thin beak brought good luck. Around hummingbirds I became superstitious. They fostered magical feelings in me. I believed that in the hummingbirds' frequent visits were spirits to keep me from harm and to keep me in sync. I watched and waited for their visits each day. Often there two hummingbirds or even three grazing the flower graced wall simultaneously. There were times when the hummingbirds fluttered about the flowers more than once a day. I was convinced of their powers to protect me. I became dependent on their visits. For much of my life I couldn't stand or stay still except prostrate and in private. If there was an animal presence in me I believed it to be a hummingbird, elusive, and uncontainable, ephemeral, an intriguing blur passing. Was I finally caught, stopped? Would I settle down and settle in with this baby once I got home? Could I sit still in one place and trust and entrust? Babies were the nectar, the flowers. Frank, was he the person for whom I could come into focus and not blur quicksilverish, an emotional runaway? Couples without babies did not have such unsparing reflectors.

Wanting to capture things precisely I became a keen observer of daily life at Casa Antonio. As if sketching I focussed on the dogs, or a sister, or one of the children to sharpen my ability to delineate detail. The ordinary became like a still frame, the subject for my incessant prose. I had the luxury of detail and time. Being a witness and a scribe suited me. With no one to ask a thing of me or to intrude, and for my only function to be the nurturing of my small child, and this done

within that archetypical and universal sisterhood of women, felt as if I had fallen into the land of the promise or a sort of near paradise.

There was great excitement one particular day. Three men came to repair and replace tiles in the courtyard. Antonio and Estelle, very proud of their new house were beginning to take great pains to fix it up. The boys stopped to watch. Luca and I had ringside seats. The women were particularly animated as they prepared the noonday day meal in the kitchen. Carmen was vigorously mopping the floors in the rooms off the courtyard. One of the men was Antonio's brother-in-law whom we met the day of the adoption in Stroessner and who was an instructor for the employees of the Itaipu Dam. One of the other two men had the chiseled look of an aging French movie star. Wearing a beret, he appeared a man of great and sensual presence and enormous strength. I learned at lunch when Antonio returned that this man was his father. The animal and the sensitive in Antonio came from a particular and unusual seed.

The brother-in-law's eyes were riveted to Carmen's bottom which she twitched like the mop she was wielding. This sort of love sparing went unnoticed except by me. These were the wells then that produced the innumerable babies for adoption. Maids provided a great source for abandoned infants. A woman could only afford to keep and raise one child. Temptation and no allowable birth control and no birth control produced this limitless crop of babies. Men were also scarce. There was one man for every seven women. And there was no divorce. These men were like bulls in a field of fertile cows. These women were but for fleeting moments brides and wives. If their insides were not infused occasionally by sperm I imagined they dried up well before their bodies' aged them out of desire if that did indeed occur. I hoped that Carmen and the brother-in-law were able to find a shadow, a corner to conceal and express their lust. I hoped that no egg lay in the shoot ready prey for impregnation. One couldn't think of fidelity and monogamy

here but of fallow land drying up unseeded and unwatered and untended to.

This sisterhood of women I had joined were beyond desperation. Their lives were ones of blank unquestioned resignation. The laughter and camaraderie came I was convinced because they had stopped up their dreams, banished them. Masturbation I surmised was as foreign as abortion and as out of reach because it did more than placate hungry appetites, it whetted them, filled them with desire. Without promise, did one learn to live unquenched? The child was all, all there was for most women of the remembered embrace. My life had been drenched in fantasies and more modestly in experiences with men. Almost to excess men had occupied much of my mind and time. Mine were feelings that needed to be freed up and made more surface. Women back at home engaged in endless discussion and pursuit of orgasm. Our bodies were practiced upon and moistened to ripeness and openness. Clinics to tutor in the art of self love were available for the more progressive of us. Tears were the dust of paper tissues disintegrating in wringing hands pleading with unconscious selves for liberation. Women sucked cocks in airplanes, in elevator shafts, in front seats of cars to befriend what they both repudiated and desired. I was a product of the generation of the found cock. I was a child of rediscovered and reclaimed, and with a vengeance, sexual aliveness and activeness. Love was relegated often to act as a mere excuse to let loose and have it, to get it. Women learned to unzip a stranger's fly with their eyes. Orgasm was now thought to be a necessity, a right, a preoccupation, an obsession. Vaginas had become the standard upon which women would rise or fall. And here in this lovely and oh so remote courtyard only a wide-hipped maid dared to let her juices flow. This gesture confirmed her greater worldliness for me. I should have known from the way she mopped and approached me that she was not yet resigned.

Yta brought Luca out a dish of pureed vegetables to feed Luca. She had earlier prepared freshly made juice and put it discretely in our room, I had almost

mistakenly thrown it out for old water, stopping short because I couldn't remember making the additional bottle. Yta, like a doe, was a gentle, ubiquitous presence, Luca gurgled with delight when he saw her. There was something more than kindness about her attention and touch.

Later that day found us wordhunting through dictionaries our spotty conversation punctuated by laughter. Pochi was sitting at an old fashion treadle sewing machine while her daughter Liis was busy with the intricacies of decorating the interior of a doll house which she did with great delicacy and a formidable attention to detail. The noon day meal and the lengthy afternoon rest were behind us. The ease we experienced was interrupted by the piercing ring of the phone. It was Jeremy calling from Washington.

He was volunteering his time with the Democratic National Committee working for Dukakis and trying to find a paying job. He was filled with both admonishments and concern. He asked why Frank didn't stay with me to protect me. He compared Paraguay to the awful governments of Libya and Lebanon. As if in a social studies lesson, he lectured me on the tortuous and tyrannical nature of life in Latin America. People disappeared all the time and were never heard of again, he told me. And sieges and coups erupted constantly like flash fires, he warned. He asked me with great impatience and irritation where my mind could have been to have put myself into so much jeopardy. Did I forget that I had other responsibilities and obligations and in fact another family? "A Jewish woman was not safe in a dictatorship run by dethroned S.S. Officers," he continued. "What if Stroessner should topple and rebellion break out? It wasn't just hopping on a plane and leaving." He asked me how we were going to afford this, and how we planned for all of us to fit into our tiny apartment in New York. "Hard questions," he told me, "like you ask me." He reiterated that choices had implications and again asked where Frank and I were going to get the money. Well, my mothering seemed to be

rebounding back to me with intense veracity. I could hear myself, as if within the lining of his words. Trying to be reassuring, I told him I was safe, that I had decided to only give this three to four weeks, that I would not put myself in jeopardy, and asked him not to make a travesty of all this. "Shouldn't Frank be there with you?" he asked again. I told him we had decided together that Frank should leave. The phone call ended. I tried to rally my composure before going back out to the terrace to rejoin the women and the baby. My heart was awash with upset and upheaval, my ears raucous with the reverberating currents of the conversation. This time I was genuinely afraid I would lose my balance, the composure I was surely and steadily trying to build.

Antonio arrived home soon after, I was bravely digging through the dictionary trying to say an amicable word or two in Spanish as I continued to sit in the ladies circle. Antonio told me that his father was 76 years old. And that both of his parents had been of French lineage. What a strange composite of people were to be found in Paraguay. Antonio always went out of his way to share details with me. Missing were the specifics of our case. The obliqueness and hierarchical nature of our relationship were part of its seductiveness, its intrigue. The ladies told him my big son called. He looked at me and smiled. I was on the verge of tears.

Soon after my conversation with Jeremy, Luca and I without warning or explanation, were moved into what had been designated at Antonio's office. The room was a little less central and not directly off the kitchen. It actually afforded us a bit more privacy, the other room being a little like an easeway between one part of the house and the other. The room was smaller and therefore cozier. Although a little disjointed by being moved without notice, I found the space more suitable for our stay. Estelle and the sisters, under her direction, moved our things, rearranging them as they saw fit.

Needing very much to collect myself after the unexpected room change and

the phone call from Jeremy, I took Luca into our new space, closed the door, and as the day turned silver to black lay in silence trying to regroup. I fell into a heap on the bed. I was losing my presence and thought I wouldn't be able to sufficiently muffle my torrential cries. I was overcome with emotion and explosive pride to have produced a son who could so reason with me. My heart couldn't avoid or deny the knowledge that by a standard I had set I could consider myself a successful mother. I, who had gotten caught on the cusp of a transition from child to adult thwarted and frozen because I still longed and needed to be a child for my mother's knee, had freed up someone not only to move away from me but to be critical without a fear of damaging our relationship or losing me. This was not talking back or a fit of childish rage, Jeremy had unsparingly exposed the underbelly of these decisions that I had made and which needed to be aired and reflected back to me. It was difficult to adequately ascribe words to a moment of near perfect fulfillment. The painfulness and uprooted emotions involved with great achievement often deterred us from succeeding.

My greatest fear, to have been a bad mother, had become my greatest triumph. For many years I would wonder what kept me from murdering the children because of the weightiness of the love I would feel for them, inordinate, limitless, and unconditional. The tawdry being that this love needed to be tempered always by the fact of increasing times of separation and the concomitant worry about the quirkiness of fate and the pervasive fact of eminent danger. It defied the imagination and almost the constitution to love as much as one, stripped down of defenses and rationalizations, could love a child. A body could barely contain and hold the feelings of this kind of love. It was precarious and even dangerous -this love which inserted itself only and without our will - we refuted it, denied it, at times bashed against it - objected - because it was so harsh and hard to love so absolutely and unconditionally and almost without choice. The love of a child could

be an onerous burden from which there was no relief, escape or release. I had always encouraged the children to challenge me or any other adult should they feel the situation warranted it. I often told them that submissiveness or silence when one had an issue or a question or a point to make was a form of false humiliation and hostility. Now the sanctity and wisdom of my decisions were being challenged by my oldest and first child.

When Jeremy was born I nearly toppled into a morbid post-natal depression because a fear of failure as a mother knotted on to my heart and wouldn't release. The very thought that I might torment and hurt him as my mother had, if unwittingly and without malice, so hurt and upset me it nearly drove me out of my body still round and sore from his delivery. A wily defiance and irrepressible indestructible gladness about life had me pull him to my breasts to celebrate and welcome him. That mother's milk had fueled the young man whose phone call had now so blunted me. What could have been interpreted as suffering from the effusiveness of my tears was really an expression of almost inutterably complete fulfillment. When Jeremy was 12, I presented him with the following poem on his birthday. The phone call was a direct descendant of that event.

On His Twelfth Birthday - January 15, 1978

Jeremy you little fucker

Listen, hear me

This is the voice of your Mother

How dare you dig deep into my skin

Look toward me to keep you from falling;

Little boy, never far from my knee

I let you stay there until you were ready

To go your own way.

Do you think it was easy
Letting you hold on to me?
Never letting myself move far away
Afraid of your screams
If you saw me disappear.
I kept in your sight
I stayed there for you to see me;
Little boy, do you think it was easy
Keeping your soul, letting it grow
Feeding it from my body
Giving it breadth and force and weight.
Do you want to know
What it cost me
To get you to be
Who you are today?
It came close, my taking your small bones
And crushing them into a million pieces
The way they had done to me
Oh my God, the self-control it has taken on my part
To let you grow
And now you're twelve years old
Your voice is less staccato
Your words flow, not like little eruptions
From a stopped-up bottle
You walk the streets alone at night
Streets that frighten men twice your size
Your speak truthfully

Your eyes have tears that are not afraid to come out
You are quiet and strong
And cheerful as a newly born Spring robin
About to take its first flight
I can see you know I would never let you come to harm
Although I was the one you most had to fear
A murderer held you as she sang
Night-time lullabies, she cried with relief
Each time she tucked you unharmed
Into your bed at night to sleep
That is why I screamed so
When you asked for that extra glass of milk
I was trying to say, I cannot be trusted anymore
I have held myself together, been tame
As much as I could endure
Now I need the night-time to restore
My courage, my strength
To keep the murderer contained, hidden
For the next day.
Oh Jeremy, dreamy little fellow
You have gotten to be twelve
And I can see in your face, your eyes
Dreams lifting up, reaching out
To gain life
Oh Jeremy, to my amazement, my pleasure
You are on your way to being whole
I have not broken your will, your soul

Number 11 on the basket ball team
Only you and I know what that means
Number 11, my son, my child
You do not have to worry about being wild
A spirit with no body, no weight
To hold you
Your life can mean what it means
And I can come from beneath the weight of my fears
I did not kill you I can see
The madness inside did not overtake me
I was you Mother not a child
Dear God, the devils, the demons inside
Wanting to revenge the childhood, mine
Taken once from me have been exorcised
Look! See! A life that was in my own body
Now stands on two feet
And walks away from me.

Antonio never knocked and I never returned that evening for dinner. Luca almost in sympathy fell as I did into an early deep sleep. Our heads separated by the frame of his handhewn cradle, we never awakened until the dawn nudged us the next morning.

Chapter 16

The days were logged in with coffee heavily diluted by milk, and some biscuits. Carmen was always busy at work before the clock reached 7:30 a.m.. Estelle with a firm hand and strident voice prepared Orlando for school each day. Uniforms must be correct. Orlando attended school for half a day. Children, Estelle informed me, began school at the age of six. Her mothering allowed for the boys to have enormous space, range and freedom and yet at the same time were kept like mounted butterflies under a microscope. The boys were endlessly and tirelessly discussed by the sisters all who had a hand in caring for them.

Except for strolls to and from the back courtyard, I got absolutely no exercise. I sat early mornings with the baby in the courtyard while the cleaning and the lunch preparations went on around me. I kept rattles, a pacifier, a bottle of formula, a book, and a notebook with me at all times. The less motion I contributed to the environment the less I was focussed on. I seemed to have found a way to blend in and was like the humming- bird I waited for each day, just there. Luca looked around calmly yet responsively, his little body in constant motion with the movements that pushed out toward growth. I was for the most part left alone except for an occasional tweaking of Luca's cheek by one sister or another, or Carmen, while passing by. I was grateful for this inattentiveness.

The sisters were involved trying to adjust to being reunited as an entity, a unity within the walls of this new house. Before moving here, Pochi lived with Estelle and Antonio, but Yta had lived a distance away in this neighborhood. It seemed, they were progressively establishing a kind of communal living arrangement, with meals prepared and eaten together, responsibilities and children shared. Estelle was definitely central in this union, the focus, the leader, the boss, for this was ultimately her household they had joined and it was her husband who

was being like a father to their daughters. Antonio was the head of this pride of women and children. He performed this role with a sense of unquestioned responsibility. Estelle in progressively obvious ways reminded the sisters of their lesser status as she reasserted control. Without formal language gestures become words. I was learning a great deal about Estelle. She increasingly reminded me of my mother. It could be because I had been reduced again to the status of dependant child that I got these uneasy waves but I didn't think so, I knew someone who could be a stark starchy controlling functionary when I saw one.

I looked forward to Antonio's return at noon and in the evening. I became unneutered in his presence. My heart even quickened, and a blush came on. I had the receptivity and openness of a new wife. I was enslaved by my need for contact with him, and entranced. The days merged in this opulent captivity. I existed as nothing more than a number on a docket, ticking off calendar days, in some higher court in this country of Paraguay. I knew nothing of my progress. The days blended, merged, combined; indistinguishable. A word in Spanish comprehended, a breakthrough in English and Antonio and I emerged in stronger focus to each other.

Pochi, who continued in small doses, to inch closer to me, and to reveal both her inquisitiveness and her insights about me, warned me at breakfast one day about the dangers of eating bread. It will make you plump, she gestured, and pointed to my hips, my upper arms, and my face; "You do not want to get fat for Frank," she told me. She must have struggled all night with the dictionary to have learned that phrase in English. I regarded it as a genuine reaching out. She was cutting across my desperation and isolation to a, more than she knew or did she, simmering and provocative reality. Pochi was taut and curvaceous and obviously worked hard at being like that. She was, increasingly, the most interesting sister to me. I found it perplexing that she lived here, sleeping in a double bed with her admittedly lovely, extremely soulful, creative, and intelligent eleven-year-old

daughter, Liis. She seemed to have no apparent plans or sense of urgency about getting out, leaving.

The visits nearly every evening of her estranged husband with their daughter seemed to unhinge her, although they were both civil and talked. He looked as if he might be gay, and seemed, at times, arrogant, supercilious, remote and condescending to the sisters. He confided in me that none of them liked school or learning, and that he had tried with Pochi. His visits with his daughter were spent around some intellectual activity; the introduction of some computer games, the exploration of an elaborate world globe and accompanying atlas; and he came equipped most times with supplies, like graph paper or excess computer paper or styrofoam, for Liis to use in her innumerable invented projects and games. He then left courteously and respectfully to some unknown life in the darkened night. When the door closed Pochi could be found smoking, and appearing worried or upset. She seemed edgy, and moved around fast looking for projects like sewing, some more cleaning, or fixing herself up which she did incessantly. The shared child, Liis, kept them tethered and unable to go far from each other. But Pochi slept abutting Liis and lolled about doorways for her entrances and exits from school each half day; while her husband studied the pollutants killing the fish in the Parana River. God knows whom he tucked next to himself in bed each night. Most men, I was learning, just moved on from wife to wife and child to child, amnesiac, in this country with no divorce.

Into the slumber of an afternoon, my father called. One would think Paraguay were next door not clear across the universe with this plethora of untimed and untimely phone calls. He was calling to booster my morale and to reassure me of his total confidence in my ability to work things out. His voice was calm and unchallenging and he was, insanely accepting of the circumstance I found myself in. It was his style in a crisis or untoward situation, many of which I had been in by his

standards, to be in complete sympathy and of unequivocal support. "You sound good, on top of things, things seem to be moving along," he said without a hint of hysteria, theatrics, or I told you so's. Eking from me each of the details with great specificity, as I was wont to do with him, my resistance inevitably in his company crumbling like avalanching rocks, he ended the conversation with an almost hymnal adieu, and his benediction, "I have full confidence in you." Reduced to simpering girliness, I felt grateful and unnerved all at the same time. Again my fortitude slipped and I felt my courage ebb like a bay at low tide. Penetrating my world here, these calls caused confusion and loneliness and intense waves of homesickness; if they also kept me in touch with who I was and my larger reality. At times it lapsed that I was supposed to be working toward getting out. I became like the sisters decorative, dependent on Antonio, and contained with no recourse or alternative within the walls of Casa Antonio.

Carmen consistently banged the mop around washing down the endless trekking feet of small boys and dogs. She was asserting herself and getting some of the upper hand. Estelle asked me not to use too many sheets and not to put too many clothes in the laundry for Carmen to do. She informed me that Carmen only did laundry twice a week. I did not have the words to tell her that it was she who incessantly grabbed my clothes and put them into the dirty laundry bin. Fumbling through our dictionaries, she continued to tell me that if they gave Carmen too much to wash and iron she would walk off the job. In the aftermath of that exchange, I couldn't tell if I was being officially redressed or being charged with doing my own laundry and Luca's in order to keep the peace with Carmen. I had the feeling that she was speaking on her own authority and that Antonio would never have any idea or knowledge of this exchange. I was constantly concerned about whether I was pleasing my hosts or badly interfering with their lives. In subtle ways, Estelle let me know that I was intruding. Out of Antonio's sight she was a

leveler. The sisters and I bonded around our victimization by Estelle. Sympathetic gazes when she roughly reasserted control were like little lifelines.

I was in a rhythm of afternoon naps. These quiet times replenished me. With Luca tucked under my arm, I experienced a rare serenity. Reemerging in the late afternoons, I found the sisters in familiar domestic scenes. The dog, Teti, always central in their camaraderie. His overreaching hulk often in Estelle's lap. Sipping matte the sisters laughed and talked. The afternoons here were stunning in their lack of parameter and variety. My feelings toward Estelle were a mire of extremes and ambivalences. I sometimes sat repelled in her company and at other times was fixed like a religious zealot at the foot of a charismatic. I studied her riveted, drawn to her in some deeper way. Intermittently, it kept being revealed how much she reminded me of my mother, my complicated relationship, my bete noir.

Liis was forever busy intricately arranging and rearranging the lives of her Barbie dolls. She had created and sewn for them a myriad of interesting outfits, and recently built them a cafe replete with handmade vases, flowers, and tablecloths. My Rebecca also could spend hours playing with her Barbies when she was her age only it was her games which were imagined, the outfits bought in great number were indulgences or stabs at normalcy on my part. My childhood was unfrilled. I had pianos and cellos and easels and books but never a Coca Cola, or white bread, or the trappings of the ordinary. Once I secretly ordered and had delivered to a friend's house the top forty tunes of the day. I was teased mercilessly because they were performed by all the wrong singers. Tight jeans sneaked out of the house and put on behind bushes, and sprayed on blond dips in my hair out of the range of my house kept me thinking I was normal and not an odd-ball. With Rebecca I inevitably leaned in the other direction to indulge the appetites she had that were dictated to by the norm. But rarely had I seen as contained and inventive a child as Liis.

The boys circled the women wielding guns, swords, racing cars, soldiers, in and up the terrace stairs, in and around doorways and passageways, up and through any of the number of combinations of exits and entrances. This house offered a multitude of shadows and corners and doorways, possibilities to enliven and protect any childhood game. The boys were given lots of lead, and rarely in imaginative times of playfulness were interfered with. They tussled like two puppies, and were permitted to get quite raucous and what we would call wild. The women were enormously tolerant and uninvolved in their play. The boys were rarely bored and, unbelievably to me, put away a game or toy with great care before going on to something else or finding some other object with which to play. Every once in a while they jumped on a lap for a cuddle or a squeeze; and never watched TV. until the moon started eclipsing the day. Bathed and scrubbed, they climbed onto Estelle and Antonio's bed. Disney cartoons were played continuously on one of the few channels. After their brief and simple dinner they went to bed. Both boys slept with Estelle and Antonio. I believed my residency was responsible for this quartet.

Occasionally Estelle without warning or apparent reason would burst into a wild rage and lunge out at the boys. She would proceed to remove them from the scene tugging them by the ear and giving them loud and lusty thwacks against the back of their legs. The house fell into a hush at these times. Her stridency affected everyone. Sometime later and out of her sight one of the aunts could be found like warm salve rubbing and comforting the little victim. These episodes of rage never occurred when Antonio was at home. In the balance though, this home revolved around the lives and well-being of all of the children.

Again we celebrated a birthday. There was the deadened nighttime sky, not a star. "Only in summer are there stars," Antonio informed me as he caught me looking up. This time it was for Antonio's brother from Stroessner who was forty-four. Here with his wife and their two children, who seemed happy and pleased to

see me again. Again no questions were asked as they admired, "My beautiful baby". The little girl had exceedingly lively bright eyes, and looked over often at me with unabashed curiosity. Antonio barbecued steak, yucca, sausages. Beer was abundant. The children took off in formation into the night after having their fill of food. The adults stood around a large table on the upper terrace cutting off big chunks of steak. Each person present came over to where I was sitting sort of on the periphery of the upper terrace and offered me food and drink. Luca was in his carriage by my side and delighted by all of the attention he was getting. We'd evolved, happily, to a state in which no one worried about speaking Spanish in my presence or excluding me from conversation. I was allowed to remain silent. I felt relieved and accepted because of this rather than ignored. If forced to socialize my inclination would have been to remain isolated and hermetic. Among the reasons I had always felt at home in New York was because I could be among people and remain to myself. This bent of mine could be expressed here as well.

When Antonio returned from work before the party began, he informed me casually, that things were moving along and that I might be able to leave in a week and a half. I was, by then, too wary to get too excited, I knew that lots could happen between in the interim. I was sufficiently acclimated and attuned to expect anything to delay or forestall our departure. My confidence in Antonio no longer flinched or wavered. With each day he grew in stature and competence. But I had also learned that this was Paraguay! This rare conversation regarding our status was minimalized to the point of suppression. Swings of optimism about returning home undermined my ability to stay there and endure.

Again the phone jangled my composure. My uncle, our family godfather stayed in touch with each family member wherever he or she was. He never failed to be with us there, vigilant. His wife providing a soft cushion to his pointed tongue and an unquestioning comforting arm. In character, he proceeded to make a

few jokes about Jews and Paraguay, an obligatory part of his repertoire, and then he asked if they had anything to export or wanted imported. He was always the businessman. The manner of his conversation let me know he understood the seriousness of my predicament and would do anything he could, that I could think of, to help me out. His appreciation of our situation was clear to me. Being my mother's twin gave him an insight and clarity about my life which I dearly valued.

I returned to the party, dislodged and a little nervous. Everyone fixed on me for a moment. I said it was my uncle and aunt. Then, they smiled, approving of the support my family gave me. The children were rambunctious in a way that would not easily be tolerated by adults in the United States. Yta took the baby, dozing, off to some corner to hold him, a thing she often did. It was almost as if she needed his warm face and breath against her breast and heart. She'd been forsaken forever, I gathered, by a husband now on to a third wife; a man of great stature and importance, with a high position in the police force. I glanced over at Antonio whom I was finding particularly more attractive. Yta returned Luca to me with a warm and fulfilled expression. I bid the family a good night and wished the uncle well. An urgent need to be alone with Luca propelled me to our room.

Behind the closed door, I caught my breath, put Luca in his primitive hand-hewn crib, lay on the bed in the dark trying once again to assimilate what had occurred and to integrate the passing day. Again I had to regain an inner balance having been thrown between two worlds by the phone call. I relocated myself in the present by returning to the book I was currently reading, "Love and Shadows," by Isabel Allende. Reading, without overstatement or exaggeration, along with writing in the journal, was keeping my mind and emotions intact. This night I was having difficulty concentrating. I worried that the phone calls were being tracked, putting our case and Antonio in jeopardy. I thought back half amused, half infuriated that Frank, in an intemperate and irritable moment, had told me not to bring books

because I would have no time for books and not to pack them. I was happy that I had learned, at this late point in my life, not to be thrown or become submissive by someone else's edge. Thoughts of Frank made me miss him terribly. I became impatient to return home and worried that people would think that Frank selfishly left me in a precarious situation. I wanted to tell everyone personally that this was very much a joint decision based on our desire to keep balance and stability in both our old lives and our new one. My sleep was scattershot with frequent interruptions from a hungry Luca who often seemed like he just wanted to lie close and be held. After he had his bottle, I let him again suck on my milkless breast. I found this a necessary way for me to mother. This night Isabel Allende could not divert.

I heard Antonio and Estelle leave to drive his brother and family to San Antonio. As the door closed behind them, my heart tightened, I verged on panic for the second or third time since I'd been there. The dogs yelped. The night was a deep, unremitting black. I was on edge. When only women and children were alone in the house, I felt unsafe and unprotected. My heart raced for the sun, the daylight to appear. At some hour before dawn, I heard Antonio's returned footsteps and relieved beyond what I'd like to contemplate fell off to sleep.

Chapter 17

For the first time since our outing to San Bernardino, Luca and I were getting ready to leave the walls of Casa Antonio. He was dressed smartly in the one special European made outfit Rebecca selected for him. We were told by Antonio the night before to be ready to go out early in the morning. As we were getting ready to leave, I was informed by Antonio that we were going to the office of the police to get Luca fingerprinted and photographed, to secure a police identification card and his passport. He said that I needed a police identification card as well and therefore also needed to be photographed. Estelle accompanied us, wearing perfectly pressed white pants, a colorful white print silk overshirt and purple spike sandals. Her demeanor was serious and forbidding. Antonio had on one of his two suits. He always wore a suit to work although I had noticed while at the hotel that many of the other lawyers dressed more casually. As we were walking out the door, Frank called. He must have had a premonition that something important was about to happen. Excitedly, I told him where we going. He wished us well and hung up. On the long ride there, not a word was spoken in the car. When we arrived, we entered the large open floor with many cubicles and stations.

We walked quietly and unobtrusively, a monochromatic presence. Antonio displayed none of his usual flash and flamboyance. Estelle kept signalling me to keep a low profile and to follow. We moved like a singular caterpillar through the halls, from room to room, office to office. There was some confusion about my names, each of which appeared on one or another of the sheaf of documents. I have had three last names: Weiss, Barber, and Pignatelli. Women give up and pick up names like cards during a poker game. We never anymore know where our loyalty should lie, or how to call ourselves. Like wedding bands, names are confusing. Men often were not explicit about how they wanted a wife to be identified. Women

often walked around with a series of names which they used like changes of clothing depending on the event. Gratefully Antonio with an exceedingly deft touch got each official to accept what he was explaining and to pass us on. At each station, Antonio made soft jokes, exchanged pleasantries, all the while smoking incessantly. Women in white blouses asked questions. Men in military uniforms sat behind them. Luca beamed for both his photos. A woman in a white blouse held him. He grumbled as he got fingerprinted but certainly did not carry on. As we were about to leave the building, having spent nearly two hours there, an officer got up from his desk to see Luca. I stiffened but Antonio gave him the baby to hold. He smiled broadly, admired Luca and gave him back. Moments later we were in the car. Once we were well on our way, Antonio's eyes beamed, and he raised his thumb to indicate a successful mission, "Bery good", he said, "Bery good!" He was obviously pleased and relieved. "No problem," I said. Antonio was always telling me, "No problem." We all had a good laugh. We drove on. I was kept uninformed as Antonio made a number of stops. He bought us warm biscuits to munch on as Estelle, Luca, and I remained in the car. "Tiempo," Estelle said, time, a little more time.

Antonio went to what seemed like some kind of an official storefront office, near the water and the of Government Palace. Men were gathered around outside, much like Off Track Betting in New York. Lawyers came in and out of the storefront. Most of them were wearing jeans or slacks and open shirts. You could tell they were lawyers by the file folders they were carrying. Antonio talked to a number of the men on the corner, handed a couple of them money, and waited outside the building. Nearly thirty minutes later he returned to the car with some unfamiliar documents and we drove off. Estelle and I had barely exchanged a word while we waited. "Bery, bery, bery good!" he exclaimed waving the papers excitedly about. Soon he would be through with us, I thought a little whimsically, and we

would be a thing of the past, over, finito, done. I knew he felt affection for us, but he would be happy when this was all over and we were on our way. My infatuation thickened like fog rolling over early mornings with each of his conquests on our behalf. Each step bringing us closer to freedom. Each step locking my heart to his. Antonio, the man who was saving us from an enduring and insufferable loss. A pang of sadness welled up in me as he playfully reiterated, "This has been a very good day for me!" He stopped to get barbecued chicken for the noonday meal. Estelle smiled and showed me Luca's birth certificate. She gestured that there was only a little, poco, left to do. I saw how much of a partner she was during the course of the morning. I felt they had an enviable relationship.

Antonio explained that we must wait for Luca's passport and Police I.D. to be completed, and when they were in hand we could leave. Antonio felt so confident that he told me I would be able to go home with Luca in one week. He told me to go ahead and make reservations for the return trip a week from Saturday. Next Monday, he said, he would return to Stroessner to clear up the mess, and then we would be able to go to the United States Embassy to conclude all the final details. Lunchtime at Casa Antonio was light-hearted. Everyone seemed animated and delighted by our progress.

Chapter 18

I had to thrust myself into the universe, to live among strangers to find wholeness, a home within. How again did I find myself embraced and imbedded in a place which almost did not exist so few had it in their minds? Why did I find myself again way beyond the stretches of my own reality combing a courtyard for the rhythms of its feet, waiting for humming birds to encircle me to infuse me with the mystical? I who trundled on and off the No. 1 IRT subway, who skirted the beggars on Broadway impatiently trying to get home late Saturday nights with a Sunday Times. I who had enacted and re-enacted scenes from "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," ad nauseum as a staple of married life. What cruel or simple wisdom brought me back again to such earthbound simplicity? Must I get anchored, find some balance, walk away from madness, and nervous breakdowns to retreat deep, so deep within the unfamiliar? Not since I left, clawing the night sky, trying to rip it off the air to blanket me, to seal me, to keep me from ever going away, not since I left the Navajo family, my found family, had I felt this level of attachment, had I fixed, blended almost symbiotically with such disparate and unrelated people. I had, once again, submitted, going beyond the regular discourse, exchanges people most generally make, and joined with these other lives as if they were family. Blending into homes, as if they were mythic creations, was a predilection, almost an emotional necessity, an elliptical theme coursing through my life.

Luca was asleep safely in the crook of my arm. This little being pressing into me as if to fossilize an imprint, who broke into sperm and egg in tiny hamlet, "The place of the broken hammock," poised equidistant from the Tropic of Capricorn, the Brazilian Border, and the Iguatzu Falls. Which inner voices brought me to him, what freakish destiny had me holding and loving this small person hardly three months old? Life had more magic than the straightforward. A mother and child

brought together thus defied any constraints of place and time. Found babies were the staple of myth and biblical lore. I was connected to this rich tapestry, I could think nothing less, as I held this child.

Rippling laughter vined the walls of the courtyard as Teti, the German shepherd, cowered and backed away as she saw me approaching. Everything stopped to watch our sparring, this was truly a case of countertransference, for in me lived a little girl petrified of dogs particularly German shepherds, a residue from the snappish and growly seeing eye dog owned by my blind Uncle Carl. What a mix-up, I advancing as Teti slinked away, our performance seemed almost staged to amuse. Estelle and Antonio were particularly captivated by our jousting this particular evening, for they were heated by love. Estelle was fragrant like a prom gardenia, dressed seductively for a night on the town. Antonio her courtier in a smart suit, highly polished shoes, and the look of conquest in his eyes. It was the first time I had seen them stepping out. Everyone congregated excitedly as they were preparing to leave, putting on the finishing touches. They were our staple, our center, we depended on their union. The multiple roles they played in each life here rested on their marital stability.

The phone rang to detain their neat and exalted exit. It was the lawyer from Miami. My stomach curdled, I cringed like Teti from the phone. Antonio after some hasty greeting, handed me the receiver. "Good news," she said. Antonio had shared with her earlier in the day from his office that we had secured a birth certificate for Luca and went through the finger printing process and should soon be getting our police identification cards and Luca's passport. "You'll be home in no time now," she informed me enthusiastically. She told me how much she admired my fortitude and my rectitude and my ability to deal with this situation with such strength and forbearance. These generous and over zealous compliments added a most unwanted and unneeded element of self-consciousness and deliberateness to

my actions bringing me near to the edge of explosive tears. I thanked her hesitatingly, my voice more and more like a little girls. I was grateful to be hidden in my foreign tongue. The receiver replaced, the group again went into action, they had been frozen in unblemished stares during the duration of the phone call. We re-convened to embrace Antonio and Estelle as they walked out the door. This was a rambunctious and heated farewell. Antonio pulled me to the side, kissing me solidly on both cheeks and said playfully, "Next week, I kick you out." Estelle broke through her reserve and hugged me. The door closed behind them, I quickly excused myself and retreated to my room. Everyone else scattered to get some solitude, a much needed pause for renewal and regeneration, out of the reach of their large shadow.

About an hour elapsed, Luca was asleep, I was composed. Yta knocked on the door to ask if I wanted some beaten coffee, or coffee blended with milk and sugar. I came out and sat with her at the kitchen table. She wanted an English lesson. Taking the objects around the table, we began. Soon we were convulsed with laughter. How differently our tongues were trained to land in our mouths when we talked. Mispronunciations formed the brunt of this hilarity. Somehow through the course of the lesson she let me know that she would like to work, improve herself, and travel, that she was tired of all this. She gave me her address and asked me to write to her. I got a forboding that she was breaking an unspoken code to let me know she wanted out. Her face, generally relaxed and pleased, became plaintive, there was a pleading quality to her request.

I suddenly understood that Yta was asking to leave, to come home with me. It had been Yta, all along, who had taken the most proprietary interest in Luca, verging at times on the possessive. Had she intentionally been building a case, making herself necessary, almost an imperative in Luca's life? Was she that plodding? Was life that desperate and entrapping for her here? Left forever by her

husband a handmaiden to her daughter's, her only child, every whim and need. Forsaken to blankness, to sameness, unremitting the whim of unstoppable and blindly predictable time. Left to languish, a fixture in a courtyard only unable to wither and die and rebud Springtimes. A bit shaken and taken aback by this insight, I excused myself, bidding her an extra warm goodnight, and went to my room.

Luca was, gratefully, sleeping soundly. I took out another of those small swallows of Scotch fortunately hidden in my belongings. And stared up at the ceiling. My body was as if pinned by a grip, filled with morbidity and despair. How many women like Yta had felt locked in place with a waning memory of a man's hand on them and with children inevitably, and uncontrollably, moving away. Left to face a life sparked by a fleeting touch, imprisoned by a circumscribed destiny, with passion and thought relentless enemies, and an innate drive for more a source of unabating frustration and pain. How many books I had read about the plight of women, how many tears I had shed, mostly for myself. How I had tried to get out of all of this, plotting a murky death because I lacked the courage for more. Wanting at times to crawl the steps of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine to ask a priest to rescue me, when I wasn't even Christian. Feeling gratified and warmed by anonymous marketing questionnaires about soapsuds, making of them something probing and personal. Seeing one day a woman of about thirty-five sitting on a tablecloth in the middle of the sidewalk intently polishing a glass and telling a patient policeman she would, "Leave as soon as she finished cleaning the house," and knowing I was almost moments from being like her.

Yta now implicitly begging, I knew the campaign had just been mounted, to take her out of this place, to steal her from this bleak and uncompromising reality. Oh women, and I had been one, for whom death or dissolution was the only escape. It clarified, that I had found myself here, to escape, run off, break rank, outsmart the

plan that my past had crafted for me. With this act to marry Frank and adopt Luca, I had broken the cycle. By re-enacting nearly the same set of events which had in the past crippled and demoralized me, I was salvaging my life. This time I would make this choice healthy. I would assert and recreate myself with full stature and presence. I could do this with Frank.

No I had not become a pilot, or a mountain climber, or a doctor's wife. I was nearly restaging the same life, only this time, I would escape being merely an adornment in Ibsen's "Dollhouse". I would be me uncorked. In truth, my ex-husband had never been able to open and sip from the bottle of wine. It was that stagnation, that refusal to be aired, to have a fragrance and a body which nearly crippled me and drove me mad. The act of withholding, its verdant hostility, a vacuous sediment fermenting, a toxicity, a brittle and unsavory living death, a certain demise. Now here, I was an optimism resurrected, Circe, upon whom the women wanted to cling to free themselves from the tyranny of their fixed destinies. My breaking out had sparked a hopefulness, this, a burden or an outgrowth or an offshoot of my persistent drive to change. In time I would have to contend with Yta, and I knew now, with Pochi, and Carmen as well. Only Estelle had no need or compulsion to connect on that common level with me. Calmed by the Scotch, my breathing synchronistic with Luca, I fell asleep.

My legs still worked. The next day I went with Yta to the supermarket to get diapers and formula. This was the first time I was allowed to walk about openly in the neighborhood. Luca stayed behind with Carmen and Estelle. I gathered his presence would make us too conspicuous. Yta held my arm as we worked our way through streets of small houses. Students dressed in black, red and yellow uniforms were walking in groups, animatedly conversing. It was Saturday morning, and high school was in session. There were thickets of unfamiliar trees clumped together along the road. The houses, made of stucco, variations of Spanish-like architecture,

were each distinct. Women were out here and there sweeping in front of their houses. There were no sidewalks. The streets were crudely cobbled. Frequent brightly painted buses climbed the often steep streets.

I was surprised to find the supermarket so well- stocked with canned goods, dairy foods, vegetables, fruits, meats, breads, and paper products; and although it was in no way comparable to most supermarkets back home, it was not bare like the markets I had seen in the Caribbean. Prices for groceries were inordinately high. Yta pointed out over and over how expensive each item was. I was increasingly becoming aware of how this Country operated. A store of relative plenty with everything just a smidgen, a hair-breadth unpurchasable. Any evidence of poverty, of chaos, of disarray, any suggestion of hardship, of paucity was kept at bay. There existed an aura of general well- being, well-stocked supermarkets, well-scrubbed children going to school, clean streets, easily accessible public transportation, with everything just a tinge beyond reach, or just barely reachable. School was expensive, uniforms were prohibitive, milk was almost unaffordable, medicine was nearly a black-market item, but yet it was all there, a mirage of plenty which kept moving off as one kept approaching.

This Country, I was beginning to see, was built on a sense of illusory well-being. One was smothered into complacency, complaint was eradicated, like egg yolk brushed against a pie crust before it was baked, these appetites were kept lightly sealed, like an alcoholic's buzz, these people were kept feeling safe and nourished, while a famine of spirit, of real fulfillment whirred around like a mild indigestion inside. And the rich, they were hidden away, headless, faceless horsemen, they plundered the countryside leaving not a trace, not a print, no evidence. Their enclaves were indeed in a separate Country. Yta and I with our few modest purchases transversed the bumpy, steep streets shoulder to shoulder. We were like sisters now that I understood her intent better. I needed not deal with her pleading

for the moment. We virtually sighed in our harmony.

More surprises, Antonio greeted us as we returned, and asked, nearly ordered, me to prepare our things quickly. Luca and I were accompanying the family on their weekend trip to San Antonio. Promptly at 5 p.m., Antonio loaded us into the car, Luca, the two boys, and I were in the back seat. The sisters and their daughters waved from the curb. Estelle turned around, smiled approvingly as we took off. How upsettingly sensitive I had come to be on her ever changing attitude toward me, on her very expressions. It was blatantly evident that when Antonio was around she became nearly sweet, saccharinely so, and when he was gone, she was officious verging at times on the cold and cruel. As we got just beyond the City limits the car started to sputter. Antonio pulled into a garage where the mechanics greeted him warmly. It was obvious that Antonio captivated and warmed people with his presence. I was not alone responding to his vitality and effusiveness. He was a character with a deep magnetism. Antonio and the two mechanics buried themselves beneath the hood of the car. Within minutes, the difficulty seemed abated and we were on our way. Antonio stopped once again to buy Luca and me a weekend ration of mineral water. I was always struck by his thoughtfulness. His gestures of kindness and attentiveness blunted Estelle's hardness.

The car suddenly swerved off the road and headed down a dirt road almost covered over by underbrush and thick growth. It was dark by now. Antonio quickly got out of the car, called out and was greeted by a man. They spoke in the darkened shadows for a few minutes while we sat very quietly in the car looking on. Antonio then gave the man some money and got back into the car after a firm handshake. "Quatro meses," he said to Estelle, and then to me, "Another baby." When I was in the car he was quick never to exclude or isolate me, never to leave me guessing. I felt his resolve not to needlessly unsettle me. Exposure to such repeated sensitivity was like a balm to me. I was always tranquil and confident in Antonio's company, if

a little aroused. Luca, typical of most babies, was lulled into a peaceful sleep by the car's motion. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, Estelle erupted. She was on a tirade and although I couldn't decipher each word I gathered this emotional outburst was about me. When she stopped, Antonio calmly told me that, "Estelle was worried that we would not get all the work done for you. She wanted the job over with, done finished. She didn't understand why and what was taking so long." I listened and said, "Estelle wanted the job completo." Antonio answered simply, "Yes." Estelle was aware that Antonio would not proceed with another adoption until ours was completed.

I had come to see that adoption was purely business for Estelle and the avenue by which she could appease her increasing appetites for acquisitions. Her vitriol was triggered by her impatience and with the fact that our case was taking up too much of Antonio's time, thus keeping him from taking on some other clients and jobs. This interplay had remarkable similarities to many I had witnessed between my parents as a child sitting in the back seat of a car. Old lessons wear well, I stared out the window fixing on the swiftly moving roadside, to bring myself out of the web of such potentially unsettling and cumbersome dialogue.

After a little more than an hour's drive, we arrived in San Antonio. We pulled up in front of the house Antonio had described as his own and shown to us on the Sunday we arrived in Paraguay. Antonio's father came out to greet us. He gave Luca and me a warm embrace. We were escorted into the house. The small livingroom was filled with people. It seemed that one of Antonio's brothers also lived in the house with his family. We were introduced to Orlando, who was rather stocky, his equally round wife, and their two sons, seven and three. Antonio, I was informed, was one of nine children, eight of whom were still alive. They produced twenty-seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. Most of this expansive family appeared to live on this one street in simple stucco houses the father had

built for them or on his land. Antonio's arrival had generated excitement. Estelle appeared uncommonly relaxed. Having grown up in this same town, she had old roots and connections to this family. Antonio put me on display, asking if I felt uncomfortable because I did not speak Spanish. "No," I answered, "I understand through faces, gestures, tones of voices, we were all people." Antonio seemed pleased by my answer. After some exchanges of vital statistics and family updates, the attention once again turned toward me. They asked how much things like cars, couches, computers, and TV's cost back home. They asked me about New York. Handing Luca to Estelle to hold, I demonstrated how people scowled, rushed, and pushed. After having a good laugh, they said, "We would rather be here." By now I was acutely sensitive and aware of their vast insularity.

Children were central to their lives. Family provided the foundation on which lives flourished. And although Frank's family in many ways resembled this one with its obligatory frequent contacts, there was always the possibility of wandering, straying off as Frank did. Here there was no alternative to these frequent and necessary blood-line gatherings. No wonder there existed such warmth and exuberance at these gatherings. Everything they were that was human must be given air, expression at these times. These were not like ritualized tribal comings together where there was no limit to what was probed if it was done within the canons of the proscribed. Chance, ecstasy, transformation were welcomed events in those circumstances. Here one was told how much air one could breathe. Every aspect of life was rationed, controlled, governed, dictated to. Stepping beyond could mean disappearance, dislocation, with never any logical or reasonable or identifiable recourse. Laws were as arbitrary as the President's whim and appetites. Even without much formal language to connect us, this family was becoming like the marrow in my bones.

Not wanting to succumb to a mounting premonition that we would never

get out of here, I followed Antonio closely as the family crossed the cobbled street. We were attending yet another birthday party, this time for Antonio's brother-in-law who was forty-five. There were brightly colored lanterns bobbing above a very extensive table. It seemed as if every member of Antonio's large family was present. Antonio was rushed by a flock of excited children. By now his sons were well merged with the group. The women led by Antonio's mother came over to view the baby. "Belindo, belindo," they chanted in unison. Antonio's mother took him from me and walked over to a seat near the wall. Antonio overheard me telling one of the women where the baby had come from and roughly pulled me by the arm and admonished me. "Never talk about him to anyone again," he warned me. I swallowed hard and tried to regain my composure. I didn't do well with those kinds of criticisms. It reminded me of my devilish side which I by habit denied or eschewed.

Frank often scolded me about indiscretions. A desire to readily blend in, be accepted, and accept others often forced me to a feigned or premature openness. "Other's eyes, I use for fuel," I had written once. But here the consequences could be grave, I had just learned that even a family, apparently as close as this one, could not be trusted. Antonio's mother and another woman were examining Luca closely. He was responding to their attention. I walked over and Antonio's mother told me, through gesture, that I must bundle the baby up more. The other woman soon appeared with a small blanket in which Luca was wrapped. I thanked her and smiled. Antonio's mother was as remarkable looking as his father with sharp, distinctive Franco-european and Indian features. She had an abundant gaiety and directness about her, a compelling ebullience and warmth. By any standard, and in any place, Antonio's parents would be considered rare.

One young boy, about eleven or twelve fastened on to me. He spoke a little English. He had gotten hold of Luca. We settled together on the far corner of a

bench along the table and began to speak. He cradled Luca, and kept kissing the top of his bald head. I was immediately touched by and drawn to this child. He asked about basketball. I took out my "Berlitz for Travelers" Spanish translation book, which we leafed through together, while pronouncing words. I had become quite adept at conversing with the use of a dictionary. There was something incredibly tender and sensitive about this child, and something extremely plaintive. I was so taken with him that I fantasized about bringing him back home with me. I gave him the dictionary as he handed Luca back to me. He continued to sit next to me as we were served up big portions of roast duckling, sopa (a lard drenched bread), and sausages. I was extremely hungry. Suddenly, he got up and ran off toward the sounds of the other children. I did not see him again, either during the evening or the rest of my stay in San Antonio. When I attempted later to ask Antonio about him, he simply and quickly cut me off.

The brother-in-law whose birthday was being celebrated stood up joined by his mother, a woman originally from Italy who came to Paraguay via Argentina, and entertained the assembled guests as if comedians at a cabaret. They generously sprinkled their routine with words like, "shit" and "son of a bitch". This, I gathered, for my benefit since all eyes cast my way each time a curse was uttered. The laughter was contagious. I, too, found myself feeling silly although I missed all the words but the profanity. Later on in the evening two guitar players arrived and everyone seemed to join in the singing, and some of the guests got up to dance. They were singing folk songs about love and about Paraguay. Some of the songs were sung in Guarani and showed a deep and meaningful connection to the Guarani Indian culture and traditions. Antonio joined me for the first time in the evening since he had scolded me to explain the essence of each song. Ambiguities and the unfamiliar were particularly difficult to handle because of the weighty unknowingness of our case, Antonio with his extreme sensitivity always seemed nearby to explain and

share the explainable to me. At times like these I often got the urge to lean into him and to kiss him. Perhaps that was why he most always lighted down quickly and briefly like my hummingbirds. Filled with a rush of sentimentality, I wondered how I could take Luca from all of this. But I knew well that all of this had given Luca away. Perhaps that was the essence of its inscrutable mystery and strength.

Suddenly I found myself with an invitation to dance. Orlando, Antonio's stout brother, had taken my hand and lifted me to my feet while he handed Luca to his obliging wife. Everyone's eyes were on us as we twirled around and around seemingly endlessly. The verses of the song went on and on. Having had little physical exercise of late, my legs felt weak and rubbery, although I was not stiff, a frequent occurrence when I danced. Frank and I always seemed to have difficulty dancing, at those rare opportunities we had to do so, I would become awkward and taut, and he would become a little mean-mouthed and impatient. Dancing was just one of those things we had not yet learned to do well together. There had been a time in my life when people would stop to watch the freedom and ease with which I moved while dancing. Fortunately, and for a reason I couldn't fathom, I felt that ease with Orlando. Orlando picked up the beat and we started circling faster. Antonio was dancing nearby with another of the guests, a particularly sexy woman, and called out to me, "Bery good, bery, bery good!" I was happy to be pleasing him but collapsed before the song ended, or more likely, the musicians waited for me to collapse before ending the song. Warmly and demonstratively thanking Orlando, I returned to my seat. Everyone burst into a spontaneous round of applause. Luca was returned to me.

The parallels were striking between some of the experiences I was having here and the time, more than twenty-five years before, when I had lived with the Navajo Indians. A Squaw Dance on the Arizona desert flashed back to me. Then, Mr. Grace Yazzi Morgan, the barrel-bellied head of household in which I was

staying, had swept me on my feet and holding me on his arm moved me through the circle chanting and dancing for what turned out to be nearly an hour. From that time forward until I left the reservation, I was indistinguishable from family. Publicly witnessed affirmations of a culture and a people, a willingness to blend, and an openness to be viewed perhaps as awkward or unnerved seemed necessary to achieve a meaningful acceptance. These homecomings were dangerous for me. They lulled me into a kind of malleability and desire to blend that was narcotic.

When I left such a contained all embracing place populated by strangers who became family, I panicked. I was like someone who became accustomed out of necessity to living within a darkened moss-lined cave and thus had no tolerance and ability to cope with the light. Within weeks of leaving the Navajo Reservation, forced out by the Chief of the Tribe who was in collusion with my father for me to return to finish my schooling, I rushed into a marriage with a virtual stranger. A whirlwind courtship of three weeks had me swapping vows, in the full company and with the complete approbation of my family. They believed they had stolen or captured me back from being permanently inaccessible to them. "She from whom my love comes, she from whom my love comes," the mantra I carried with me in recognition of the Navajo mother I had abandoned for all times to conform to my station in life, if completely to betray my mind and heart. Ultimately, would I have been able to endure living in the desert carding wool, watering sheep, and sleeping on a dirt floor abreast my long-haired husband and flanked by a little band of almond skinned babies? A possibility washed away like a sand-castle at high tide.

I later understood my marriage as a shredding of a self which was still too weak to stand up to scrutiny. My parents had immediately upon my return from the reservation began a campaign on the virtues and necessity of marriage. "You will find out you can live without it," my mother in an atypical motherly moment shared with me. What a lot to probe in that statement! "You will get a reputation

as a fickle woman if you don't start narrowing down the field," my father had warned. With the Navajos I had experienced a kind of freedom and vitality, a real hunkering down with what I came to understand as central to the core of myself. But that awakening was too fragile to stand up to the crude and overbearing anxieties of my parents. Jeremy and Rebecca's father had become my husband exactly three weeks from the moment I had first laid eyes on him.

Let the Cat Out...

A lion's in that man somewhere
The restrained speech
The suggestion of tears
I licked my chops
At what lay beneath the words
So tempting, the unsaid
A gentle knight, a lion for my bed
We held the chalice
To each other's lips
Some wine for the promise
The candle easy in our gentleness
Two weeks later the promise kept
White mantilla, crimson vest
Gold rings exchanged
Silken sheets on an heirloom bed
On the wall embroidered
His family crest
Betrothed in lightness
But not deceit

A maelstrom of incompleteness
My legacy;
His, a family of forms
Courtesies without warmth;
I called
Come out my predator, my King
Let us begin our kind of living.

At twenty two, I was burdened by a self-knowledge which totally out-shadowed and out-weighed my capacity to act. I called it poetry, but it was truth trying to fight its way out of me into what is called real life. I had written this soon into the marriage, our courtship no longer than a night's life sleep in a life's context. I had married my familiar and yet discarded part. The side of me so needy and unfulfilled. I had married my worst parent, or the least fulfilled of my parental relationships. I had married my mother. This man was no stranger. He was the comfortable if destructive. And I offered him, he smelled it out in moments, a obsessional need to be necessary, if not loved. We were in perfect balance, perfect harmony as long as neither of us tried to change the juxtaposition of our internal natures, of our very incomplete and haunting pasts.

As I looked down at Luca, I a woman nearly fifty years old, wondered how I was going to react if I managed to get out of the safety and total containment of this place. Would a quicksilverish, wild streak, a frightened child be reawakened by the contrast? The fertile and restless mind was omnipresent, it was receptive without censoring, to any thought which happened, at any time, on its own volition to float up. This awakened fragment from the past filled me with an obvious sadness.

Time to go to bed. Antonio with his hand tucked under my arm escorted us back across the street after a rather boisterous and extensive departure. Luca and I

were directed to Antonio's parents' bed which was made up in fresh, special linen. I shuddered to think that they had entrusted such fine linen to Luca's very leaky and untrustworthy bottom, this another touch of their kindness, and graciousness.

Antonio's father, who asked me to call him Poppa, gave me a very powerful flashlight in case we had to get around during the night, and with a warm embrace wished us goodnight. Antonio then came in to see if we needed anything. I was, indeed, falling in love with him. My inclination was to pull him down to lie with us. My face a little flushed, my breathing a little heated, I was grateful it was shadowy and dark. I was swept by a need to have Antonio reciprocate my feelings and to fall helplessly and uncontrollably in love with me. Nearly bewitched, I vowed to myself to try to make that happen. The desire to have Antonio fall in love with me had become more frequent and recurrent. Perhaps as I felt myself vanishing among these people and becoming one, I had started scoping and staking out a life for myself. Perhaps, as I had read of victims of incarceration whose captors become objects of love, I too had fallen into such desperate straits. Nevertheless, girlish infatuation or pathologic attraction kept Antonio in a silent if precarious juxtaposition with me.

Luca had a very quiet bottle during the night and managed not to soil the heirloom sheets. I spent a sleepless night following the circulating shadows. As dawn broke, I found Antonio's Momma and Poppa sipping tea through silver, spoon-like straws in front of a wood burning stove in the company of Orlando's two young sons. We were eagerly greeted and I was given some morning tea. Antonio soon entered to fetch us. After a very hasty, as is his bent, farewell, we got back in the car and headed for Estelle's parents' house.

Chapter 19

Estelle's mother greeted us. She burst forth like wild, excessive sun, so warm, so personable, so demonstrative, so vital, so gutsy, so earthy. She was as expansive as Estelle was withheld. There was a thick cigar dangling from her mouth. She virtually pulled me from the car and launched a tour of her garden. This house was far more rustic and simple than any belonging to Antonio's family. It neither had modern plumbing nor an outdoor barbecue pit. The little garden was filled with fragrant and beautiful flowers most of which were not familiar to me. Estelle's father, who waved a greeting, was busily engaged cleaning the house. Again we were pressed into the bosom of the family like long lost relatives. The preparation of the traditional Sunday meal of rolled beef, sopa bread, and salad, was in process. Estelle's mother literally forced on me a plate filled with sopa bread. It had the weightiness and bulk of those foods we ingest to calm or quiet anxieties. "Peanut butter," a professor, I once had, said, "was the only rational response to existential anxiety." Well sopa bread was closely aligned. The bread had a soporific effect on me and I was unable to join the family when they actually sat down to eat. Estelle's mother, alerted through gestures to my plight, led us to a little room where Luca and I had a sound nap.

When we awakened a couple of hours later, we found Yta and some other older women had joined the family for what was their weekly game of bingo on the multipurpose dining table. Present also, were Estelle's brother's wife and their two daughters. Neither Antonio, nor her husband or Orlando, Antonio's oldest son, were about. Estelle informed me that Antonio was visiting friends, Orlando was with cousins, and that her brother, who was a police officer, was playing soccer. Yta was calling out the numbers. I settled outside in the garden with Luca on a chair and was joined by the three remaining children. Feeling extremely relaxed and

almost gay, I began to sing some old favorite children's songs to them. Within no time, they were joining me in the gestures of the "Eency Weency Spider," and "She'll be coming around the mountain,". At 4 p.m. precisely, Antonio came to collect us. Again we moved out quickly and neatly. Estelle's mother nearly crushed me as she hugged me goodbye. I hoped she would come to Asuncion to visit. Estelle, it became clear, was driven to her acquisitiveness as a reaction to her humble background. She had none of the exuberance and presence of her mother. It was this unapologetic basicness and directness she was bent on moving beyond.

As we drove to the edge of this small town, we turned up a lengthy drive sequestered behind guards and a barbed wire fence. At the end of the road, there was an ostentatious contemporary house. The lawn was perfectly manicured and there was a large swimming pool with an ornate gazebo. This obviously was the home of someone exceedingly rich who had the need to be protected by guards and barbed wire. Antonio got out of the car, entered the house, and returned moments later with a reluctant and pouting Orlando. He was balancing precariously a few pieces of richly layered chocolate cake. We all greedily stuffed our mouths with cake and took off for Asuncion.

Back in Asuncion before going home, Antonio drove up to the Hotel Cecilia. My heart pounded with trepidation. A couple emerged with Antonio who had left the car. They were holding a small child. They had arrived earlier in the afternoon and been given informal custody of their daughter who was, in fact, celebrating her first birthday. The couple were from Ohio, and were also clients of the Miami lawyer. So indebted to her were they for their child, that they had named their little girl after her. They had an envelop with two hundred dollars of American money for me. The lawyer in Miami had asked them to deliver it. I had mentioned my limited cash on hand in a telephone conversation with her. This was her response. The couple and I promised to get together and visit. Antonio just stood to the side as

we conversed. Perhaps he sensed a need in me to converse in English. Needless to say I never saw or heard of them again. I was a hostage, marooned, imprisoned by my wait.

Back at home, Estelle predictably and gratefully bathed Luca. Antonio told me to be up ready to leave with Luca at 7 a.m.. Estelle would be taking me to the Department of Social Welfare to proceed with the processing of Luca's papers. We needed a release and approval from that agency to continue. He, Antonio, would be leaving on the midnight bus for further negotiations with the judges in the Court of Appeals in Stroessner to see if he couldn't wrench a resolution out of them to our case. Luca was returned to me relaxed, shiny and scrubbed. The door closed on me giving me some time for quiet and privacy. Again I found myself reaching for one of those little bottles of scotch. There were still three or four more in my reserves. I had to gear up for a daylight excursion with Estelle and for the omnipresent and ubiquitous police, prevalent like utility poles, with crash helmets and automatic rifles astride their legs.

Luca wriggled into a comfortable position in his cradle, and I lay prone on the bed. It was one of those times when thoughts fell upon me like driftwood on a beach. Like a troublesome puzzle with a hundred tiny odd bit pieces, I was trying to put this place into some kind of grid for myself. I needed to take my experiences and growing understanding and give them shape, make them into something whole. To give myself a place, something with form I could exist within. I remembered some earlier discussions with Frank, when he had told me that these people had collapsed like beaten dogs after a border war with Bolivia in 1932 and handed over, with barely a whimper, their country to General Stroessner who held a coup, more like a temper tantrum, than a terrorist act proclaiming himself President and Dictator in 1934. In return for absolute control, he offered the promise of peace and tranquility. What I see he ultimately gave the Paraguayans were lives which were

totally and absolutely devoid of the worry of things like choice, freedom, and power. Emotions, thoughts, and passions ignited by art, music, literature, theater were suppressed and unkindled by a studied withdrawal of an aesthetic presence in every day life. He had, by now, been there long enough to remove either a recollection of or longing for any of these things. Protest or resistance against the status quo occurred, if ever, in denied and banished dreams. Jobs were distributed on the basis of membership in the only political party, the Colorado Party.

This systematic sanitization of these people, kept just ebbed of hunger and in adequate housing, began to seem more frightening to me than the ubiquitous guns. The fact that most of this population of predominantly women was under forty made the positing of alternatives to fuel an underground a near impossibility. Harboring every despicable and unwanted criminal and political outcast from everywhere else in the world; with a particular penchant toward the aristocracy of Nazi leaders, gave evidence that this was a populace of individuals without even the scantist bit of historical knowledge to fuel pain, outrage, or protest. The people I knew within the walls of Casa Antonio would not consent to being co-conspirators to barbarity if they were fully apprised or aware, I thought.

I swallowed hard on my Scotch and beyond my better judgment and with unwarranted display of optimism finished the little bottle. I had been making all the others last for three or four days. When the sun came around I found I hadn't slept and had to begin, in earnest, to prepare Luca and myself for the day's visits. At 6:55 a.m. we were ready at the door when Estelle came to collect us, bidding goodbye to Carmen already at work.

The day was drizzly and chilly. Estelle was much more of a task master than Antonio. She shepherded us to the corner and onto a bus while holding my arm at the elbow. The street was cobbled and uneven, slicked with light rain it seemed unnavigable. I was clutching onto Luca, afraid I would lose my balance or control.

Getting onto the bus which stopped only for moments, and through the turnstile with the baby and the diaper bag, was akin to a gymnastic stunt. In the bus, music was playing on a radio, native embroidery bordered the driver's window. Asuncion was filled with steep hills, these lively brightly colored buses climbed up and down as if fueled by the challenge. It goes without saying, that there was no pushing and shoving, no restless commuters unnerving everyone. The bus stopped for only seconds and one had to be flight footed to mount and dismount. Our driver kept zooming through red lights making the streets frightening and dangerous to crossing pedestrians.

We got to our stop, and entered a building which I learned was the Ministry of Infants. I never fully knew where I was going or the ramifications or meaning of the visit until I got there. Again, we began our official breathing, light and unobtrusive. We neither smiled nor looked at each other. It was 7:15 a.m. and the person we needed would not be in until 8 a.m.. We sat down on a hard bench to wait. Luca obligingly sat on my lap wide-eyed and silent. This, I gathered, was the public social service agency charged with protecting children. There was a calm, orderly, non-hysterical atmosphere. The women came to work in tight fitted suits, embroidered stockings and high heels; the men in suits, or well-pressed pants and starched shirts. At precisely 8 a.m., the man we were waiting for arrived. Estelle immediately approached him. He seemed to recognize her. She showed the documents, then he looked toward us sitting erect on the bench. We smiled slightly in return and they continued their business. I saw Antonio's brilliance in this scene. Each passing worker leaned over Luca to admire him and comment on what a beautiful baby he was; the man processing our papers had this view of baby cuddling as a back drop for his review. He rose from his desk and was off to get some official signatures after asking me to step up and sign my name to three sets of papers. I quickly looked to see which name to use, and thought I must shed my

former married name and have a new passport issued with my new married name on it. Estelle held the baby.

The signatures secured, the man told Estelle everything was in order, and that the papers would be ready in a day or two. Although the baby had gone to the bathroom in his pants, we did not change him, and with quick, discrete steps, left the agency. We then mounted another bus and headed home. As soon as we walked into the door, Estelle made a quick call, and we were off again, back out into the chilly, rainy day. This time we left the baby with Carmen. Now it seemed we needed to take two different buses. We were on our way to the office of the police. We were going there to pick up Luca's passport and police identification card. On the way there, Estelle and I sat in separate seats on the crowded bus. We passed the fashion house of Yves St. Laurent, slicing the ordinariness of the streets giving evidence of the presence of sophistication and wealth. The visit was short. After what looked like some rather intense discussion, Estelle took my arm and guided me out the door and back out onto the street where we took the double bus ride back home empty handed. Apparently, there was a snag; something about Luca's fingerprints not taking was all I could fathom. Estelle, in a rare reassuring moment, told me not to worry. Volunteering little more, we sat in silence for the remainder of the ride home.

At home, there was some warm stew laced with a chili-like seasoning waiting for us. Luca was cranky and felt a little feverish. After lunch, Luca and I retired to our room for our nap. I tried to grasp what had happened and to keep myself from becoming panicked. Here we were, goddamnit, being kept in a house in a country in which even dreams, so suppressed, seemed washed out of existence. I was outraged and indignant that we were being dangled at the end of some grasp for power and that I could do nothing but attend to Luca and stay calm. More and more I was struck and increasingly upset by the fact that here I was locked in a society that did

not experience inner torment, lost the impetus to think more, be more, and was not angry. That in these people the creative was not waiting to erupt. In the unturbulence of their being, I wondered if they could really feel love. Women were left dangling parenthetical, tossed like thrown-off shoes, while men went off to seed more and more babies.

This a place where abortion, divorce and birth control were crimes against the state, and the Catholic Church was merely a subsidiary or a wing of the government. I was a New Yorker, intensity and passion were like the communion wafer after confession. Politics was the bread of nearly every meal. I could not stay here forever, I could not stay here much longer, I would blow my stack, I would speak in tongues, I would be reduced to rocking in a curled position. My heart could not take too much more of this collective amnesia from the qualities that make us yearn, strive, and cry for help in the middle of lonely nights. I was about to explode as I waited once again for Antonio to return from Stroessner to find out if my incarceration. Luca the weight, the ball and chain on my leg, Luca my *raison d'etre*, Luca without whom I could no longer live, and for whom I would give my life - would soon be over and we would be free to leave on the next plane for Miami out of Asuncion.

I began to feel weepy. I was getting weary of being held up in sublime isolation without a common tongue, a boarder in a house where I loomed large as a problem to be solved, a weight on their integrity and respectability. I had to learn to be as tenacious and spirited as Antonio. I could not be an intrusive boarder walking around looking sullen, morose, or sad. I could not encroach on their energies and good will with impatience, mistrust, or panic. My job here was one of patience, nothing more nothing less. Adrienne Rich once wrote of needing a "Terrible patience". I, too, had to tap that resource.

Chapter 20

Antonio arrived back, the grey chilly day was fading. He had been in a car crash. I rushed out with the boys to inspect the car. The car had been hit quite hard, in the rear. Antonio's neck was thrown in this rush hour accident. When we returned to the house, Estelle pointed to the word, "depressed" in the dictionary. I gathered she meant Antonio. Luca and I were being implicated as a cause of this mishap.

A while later, Antonio came into the room, where I was sitting quietly trying not to lose my presence of mind. He told me that the police would not release Luca's police identification card, or passport until the case in Stroessner was resolved. Further, that there would be no trip home on Saturday; and that he would return to Stroessner on Wednesday, and that I would go with him on Thursday if things didn't work out on Wednesday. I imagined he wanted me to plead my case before the judge. I was kept in the dark about the details, about what precisely was going on in Stroessner. Antonio volunteered no further information and I did not ask.

After he left the room, I began to cry. This mess, this entanglement seemed just to be going on and on. Not knowing was the worst hell. Certainty could be grappled with. Antonio's frequent visits to Stroessner were veiled in secrecy. This above all else frightened and dislodged me. And I knew that I could no longer leave Luca here because I would never come back here to get him. As if Frank divined my upset, he called. Only instead of just asking how we were and giving me a reassuring cheer, he proceeded to ask me some questions about work. Work! That aspect of life now being brought to life clobbered me like rolling avalanche stones. My job had so far receded in my consciousness that it seemed to take place in another life.

I became enraged at having my job introduced into this reality. I lashed out at

Frank, telling him I was having all I could do to keep a sense of balance and order here, and that I could not afford to be exposed to anything I could not, first hand, respond to or control particularly, when so much here was out of my depth and range. Frank's first response to this tirade was to yell back. Quickly, restraining himself, he asked how everything was going, and apologized for bring my work up, and said he just missed us a great deal and wanted us home. Without trying to alarm him, I told him simply that Antonio was working prodigiously on our case, doing little or nothing else, and making almost daily pilgrimages to Stroessner on the midnight bus and and each time returning well after dark. Not totally convinced and a little impatient, he wished me a warm and loving goodnight. I had wisely never told him that we were expecting to leave within days. Obscuring exact and up to the moment detail was part of our survival.

Back in the room, I felt ashamed that my composure had eroded. I was angry at myself for breaking out of the implacable good girl mode I knew so well and had practiced so often with my father. In the most hellish days of my life with my ex-husband, I never during our weekly family calls ever sounded like anything less than a wife stepping off the pages of "Good Housekeeping." I did not want to share my dilemma with Frank partly out of a protective feeling and partly because I wanted to own something even if it was my crumbling ability to deal with this captivity. I was proud and I wanted to be an island unto myself. I was going back to my needing no one stage. I was reverting back to placidity, and imperviousness.

Another day in Asuncion

Under gray skies

Promising to tumble into rain

The clambake yammering of three women cooking

In a language I do not know.

A pressure cooker hissing
Antonio is sinking in problems
He is losing his grip, and
I must stay out of the public eye
Be like a ground hog nonchalantly
 nibbling succulent grass
At the curbside of weepy afternoons.

This crib of words launched yet another day, one in which Luca was three months old. I noticed his hair sprouting as he nuzzled close to Yta's ample bosom. She held the man in him, for there would be no other she told me. At thirty-six, she atrophied, sap, honey, warm gushing spring thaws divert, they did not rush through her. She has had her time, her daughter nearly eighteen almost a woman; forever concluded the final page on love. It was all about choices; having the choice, being able to make a choice, having the courage to choose. Here for a woman choice happened once, if at all, when she spoke her marital vows before a priest. The rest was determined. And although Pochi manners more lust and heat, more of the predator than Yta, she was equally imprisoned by the walls of Casa Antonio and her irrevocable and interminable wedding vows and evaporated marriage. And here I was at forty-eight, remarried to a man nearly eight years younger, and once again the mother of an infant. My choices being so great and vast and far-reaching as to make me circumscribed and self-limiting and afraid. Pochi was playfully running around the house on a broom stick trying to taunt the dogs, while Yta, Luca and I kept company in our room, with the door slightly ajar. Estelle was nowhere to be seen; thus, the levity and lightness in the house. Carmen was banging around the mop somewhere in the distance. The day just slipped and moved around this way. Estelle came back, the atmosphere became restrictive.

I was resolved to remove any element in which an expectation was of a precise nature. I knew I had to accept the fact that I would go home when I went home. I had to stop counting days, weeks, charting time by the departure of Air Paraguay for Miami. I had to just focus on the events of each day. Waiting for details was what threw me. If I waited for nothing I would survive. This was the reason, like a tight corset, this the discipline and temper I had to exact on myself. Flashes of concern about my job had to be smothered quickly like brush fire. I had to be justifiably grateful to have uninterrupted, all involving time with Luca.

My bathroom was suddenly restocked with toilet paper, a constant source of agitation. People from back home just needed toilet paper. And paper products here were a scarce commodity. I could not consider the disappearing rain forest although it was probably merely hours from where I lived. Bottoms here were not lavished like ours by toilet paper. My days had frequently been punctuated by working up the nerve to ask for more. There was a strong message in this gesture. To me it meant, we were trying to be extra sensitive and obliging to your needs for we were all in this together for the long haul. Every one seemed to be extending themselves, going out of their way to see if I needed anything, if I was comfortable. Now that it was obvious that my stay here was without a predictable end, we were all having to intensify our efforts to come together.

It was another drab and dreary day, there was a chill in my body, but strangely my spirits were better now that I had accepted the fact that there would not be for the time a date for our departure. Antonio told me that I would soon be accompanying him to Stroessner to meet the judge. I imagined that I was the next weapon in the arsenal. I never questioned or challenged Antonio. I never had, nor had to, trust or believe in another person as completely or unequivocally. My impulse was to wear black and genuflect at the judge's knee, kissing his hand. Knowing better, I would put on one of my cheerful, youthful looking outfits which I bought in the local

Indian dress shop on Broadway before leaving. I wondered if Antonio would take us along to San Antonio this weekend. Aware that we had said such definitive goodbyes, I strongly doubted it. I knew there was someone in his family whom Antonio did not trust. Estelle, I was sure needed and wanted some time away from me. The dependent child in me cringed at these thoughts.

Luca and I went out in the courtyard after a lengthy nap. The weather had cleared up. Pochi was having a pedicure on the upper terrace of the courtyard. One foot soaked in a tub, while callouses were rubbed from her other foot, her fingernails were filed and painted. My feet quivered at this sight. They were so sensitive and untouched in this way. My life had never made room for manicures and pedicures. I was totally unaccustomed to this form of pampering. It was almost with self-righteousness that I did not so indulge. I was an aristocrat of the schooled and cultured and had for some reason not been able to blend Virginia Woolf with a pedicure. There was something unsavory about this kind of indulgence. And here I was where this for women was their only world. Parenthetically, Frank's sister was a professional manicurist.

How much of female experience had been lost to me. I began to doubt my femininity and worry about my complete lack of feminine wiles. Frank had occasionally commented on feminine wiles to me, but it passed over me like fleeting rain. Suddenly I am repulsed and upset by my gaps, my self-imposed asceticism. I was fascinated, I felt like a young girl peering into the secret drawing room of women pampering and indulging themselves with great sensuality and pleasure. The austerity and rigidity with which I denied this aspect of life filled me with increasing alarm and question about myself. Pochi's legs were now being waxed. Her hair was soft and flowing, the effect of the yogurt and lemon treatment given it earlier in the day. The manicurist was an ample, and gregarious woman who worked very diligently and with great professionalism. She drew her tools

from a well worn, well stocked leather carrying case. Pochi and she were engaged in animated and easy conversation. There was much laughter. Pochi was as relaxed as I'd seen her. I was welcomed with warm smiles and gestures and thoughtfully not burdened by a verbal exchange. Everyone present seemed to be bending over backward not to tax my need to socialize or to use my energies, even to look up words in a dictionary. I must have had an incredibly deep look of sadness or remoteness, or they sensed my body pining to be home, an emotion, at this point even eluding me.

My parents called pulling me away from the lull that I was feeling. Predictably, my mother aroused unsettling anxiety in me. She asked about work, how I could afford to be away so long. My father cutting in said I sounded fine; I had barely said a word. He went on to say that I should tell Antonio's family that they were welcome to stay with them in New Jersey when and if they came to the States. Mumbling some brief reassurances, I made the conversation short.

Moments later, Frank called upset that we would not be coming home soon. The lawyer from Miami had called to inform him. He shared that he went through the rigors of a dissertation defense with flying colors. This, indeed, was good news. Much of our lives together in the last six or seven years had been centered around Frank obtaining a Ph.D. in Philosophy and Education at Columbia University. He told me Jeremy was working hard on the Dukakis Campaign in Washington and filling out law school applications; and that Rebecca was the poetry editor of her college's literary magazine. This news brought me to tears which I sucked down. Her struggles were my triumph. The outpourings of her soul my immortality. I reassured Frank that Antonio was on the case, that Luca was thriving, and that I was on calm, deliberate and in control.

The phone replaced, I gathered Luca up and rapidly entered the much needed solitude and privacy of our room to try to absorb the contents of Frank's phone call.

Life was going on without me. This was what must happen when one died. Things just went on. I was tinged with a little resentment that Frank was now the keeper and communicator of information about Jeremy and Rebecca. I thought ironically, if with a residue of bitterness, that here I was married to another man who was well on his way to achieving a publicly esteemed status, to becoming a something, while I continued to improvise and make myself up. Frank would be the third man I would have seen to completion of a Ph.D. including my father whose studies cast a large shadow on my childhood. Already so soon again into motherhood was I getting those vanishing feelings, the kind that make a face seem a blank in a mirror. Would it not, in fact, be better to remain here relieved of the outside world, and thereby anything or anybody to resent or envy?

I pulled Luca on my belly to bring me back to a sweetness, a containment. Loving and being trusted was, for me after all, an important tributary, an important element for inner balance. My ballast was to know that I could love without bringing harm. I needed the weight of complete, all abiding, unquestioning trust. It was inappropriate I learned harshly from my first marriage to expect that from a man. Only babies could do that. "Never trust me completely," Frank had warned me. "It is too much of a burden. Adults don't operate like that." I guess I had become, if reluctantly, an adult. But I was even at this advanced age unable to give up babies.

Luca, his smells, his wisps of hair, his sweet breath, his small toes and little fists made me feel once again very much alive. It was he who was already filling up my life with purpose, no so much more, it was he who was transfusing my insides with vibrancy and viability. I knew what I was doing when I wanted him. This was when one knew ones own truths which must always be out of necessity inscrutable and out of reach for any other. Luca his little chest pounded with laughter as I eased him out of his little cradle lifting him above my face twirling him like a perfectly

balanced mobile. We were in perfect harmony. A laugh broke through my ribs. I would be okay.

Chapter 21

Luca teeth sprouting, hair wildly golden in the daylight, looked on playfully as I made contact once again with my friend Albert at Air Paraguay. We were now on first name basis. As if a Beckett character, I made and remade reservations for return flights as if that were an end in itself. Albert humored me, I must not be the only person incessantly booking a flight out of Paraguay. We were nearing the end of September. As much as I have talked myself into it, I needed definition. Open-ends and the lack of predictability were fraying me. Without warning I was buffeted by a huge wave of anxiety. I was thrown totally off-balance. I looked ahead for something comforting, a place to fix my eyes. Natural child birth classes got me to learn how to focus out. Some lessons never leave you and seem to have wide application.

I kept hearing Luca's pediatrician repeating, "They can lock up anyone anytime for no apparent reason and there will be no one there to help them." Was I reliant on a handshake, on the deft negotiations of Antonio alone? What if the iron claws of imprisonment should come down around him? Perhaps Estelle's ambivalence toward me originated with her fear for her husband's safety. There seemed no alternative, I had to unwaveringly trust Antonio and never to doubt his skill or ability to work this out. I must never harbor another plan even if in a dream, for I knew that any faltering on my part or the glint of a doubt would throw him off course. Did a wife have to yield this way to her husband? The power of absolute faith must be dizzying. Perhaps in truth I was a formidable rival to Estelle. A man could never yield thus to another man in circumstances like this. Yes, it was better that I was the one to stay behind. I was working my way back into this reality, settling back in like drying cement. Anxiety and fear seemed to jump out at me as if lurking around corners, hiding in shadows.

An apparition, a godsend, suddenly Estelle's mother appeared. She was chomping on a big, thick cigar. Saliva slithered threw her teeth, a snake's spit, right into the flower boxes. Upon seeing us on the horizon of the courtyard, she plunged at us exuding an overwhelming warmth. I allowed myself to be comforted without reservation. She must have divined my doubt, my feeling dragged into the underbelly of our circumstance because she held onto us as if applying life-saving breath. She sat us down next to her and began conversing vociferously. She was not deterred by our language differences. And somehow I felt as if I clearly understood what she was saying. We were talking about the weather. The sky was an unembarrassed blue, not a cloud, blue like an oil chalk. The golden stalk-like flowers threw off a scent, the hummingbird appeared. A tall palm waved its mane of full branches. The breeze was clear and free. I felt immediately better. She advanced on Luca who squirmed with delight and she scooped him up, escorting him along the flowers, telling him their names. Even the hummingbird held its ground undeterred by her sizeable presence. She was squared off by two stump-like legs that ran veins like utility wires within them. It looked as if it hurt to stand on them. Rarely seated, she was either inured or obstinate. Suddenly the air electrified. Antonio was home. It was nearing the noon-day meal.

We ate in shifts. Antonio, Estelle, and I ate together last. Luca was at the table in his umbrella stroller sort of humming and sucking to himself. Antonio placed his chair close to mine. We had a hearty meal of pasta with chunks of beef in a thick sauce sprinkled generously with cheese. On the side there were freshly cooked carrots and beans swathed in butter. There was an unsparing use of salt. Like everything else, these people would be the last to know about the hazards of cigarette smoke, salt, and beef. They were cast off like nomads in the desert, Indians in tree huts along the Amazon, only the attributes of a sluggish modernization surrounding them. They were uncannily ignorant of the health hazards which were

illuminated for us on cereal boxes, beer, and cigarettes. We lived in a society which did not question the sale of the dangerous as long as one was forewarned. It was not good for me to stick to thoughts like these and brushed them rapidly from my mind like lint. Sweet fresh bread and freshly made fruit punch accompanied the meal.

We ate in near silence. Antonio winked and smiled at me every now and then. I mustered up a smile back. He seemed to know that earlier I was subsumed by discomfort about my dilemma. And I knew that his faith in me rested on my ability to regroup and rebound. I was for moments overtaken by a voluminous love for him. Why I didn't curl up into him was a tribute to a strength and self-control yet identified. I loved him with that feverish, blistery feeling that made one's heart spasm and jump like a solid implacable fish on a line. I was locked into my overwhelming feelings, riveted. Snapping the spell, he asked if I wouldn't like to go to the circus. It was coming to town soon. Any inappropriate expression of my intense feelings would have disgraced me. Yes, I answered simply.

Luca and I were together a galaxy of emissions - his bodily eliminations flowing with total abandon and my thoughts - random, runaway, involuntary, and energy-ebbing. A bittersweet recognition crossed my mind. I no longer could see my baby up close without the aid of glasses. He was a batch of blurry features without them. I remembered being able to gaze endlessly at Jeremy and Rebecca as small babies bare-eyed. It was the end of siesta time and the sisters had gathered. Days and afternoons here lacked any Tuesday, Wednesdayishness. The afternoon washed the day of its colors. Shards of broken glass sealed us from intruders and curious neighbors as they projected off the top of the garden wall. All the women, except for Carmen, were bathed and shining. Estelle suggested that I, too, bathe. Yta took Luca, who licked her arm like a pup. I was again, gratefully, yielding up to the rhythms of Casa Antonio. I was relieved Mama was still there.

Evening came, and the residue of day drifted off. The phone pierced the quiet.

It was Frank. "Frankly, I miss you. We have to change strategies if Antonio can't get the signatures," he told me. He went on to say that our apartment, which we had put up for sale, was thought to be too cluttered by a real estate agent. This was a bone of contention, for I had stuffed an enormous amount of large and comfortable furniture into a small and inelastic space. This apartment, bought with my divorce settlement money, was small. It was of dollhouse proportions, propped up by cardboard thin plasterboard, and rounded off by geometric and graceless metal door frames. It had a feel of being assembled and fabricated in a factory. It offended my sensibilities and decried any hint of the aesthetic. There was something murky and frightening, an uneasy feeling I could never shake when I was in it, almost as if I couldn't face being reduced to what it was. The place sapped, eroded the very sources of energy a home is to replenish and nourish. Its redeeming feature was that it was in the neighborhood, just off Broadway, in which I raised Jeremy and Rebecca.

Coming home here was as if returning from a five year, self-imposed exile some twenty streets south. The lack of space was what motivated our move. I had used what was for me an inordinate amount of restraint, limiting any expression of the level and intensity of my dislike for and discomfort in the place. Frank went on to share that he would be teaching a course, Politics and Education, at City College. I knew what this meant to him. He would be returning to teach a course at his college, the college he attended as a butcher's son from the Bronx, a circumstance which kept him in a perpetual state of nerve induced hives. He concluded by saying, "I love you."

I moved quickly back into our room. Composure was once again lost to me. I fell into a maelstrom of premonition. How would we make our lives work with a baby, a move, a new job for Frank, studying for his language exams required for his Ph.D., the vicissitudes of child care, and my job? Flashes of the unsuccessful past

swamped with these same issues overflowed like bad effluence. Was I just repeating a most unresolved and insufferable reality? Was I just stalwart and grouted, destined to tread my wheels in place? I felt a surge of self-pity, remorse, and rebellion, a negative anticipation, a gloomy forboding of things to come. Had I after all pulled off the ultimate self-mockery, reintroducing almost in replica what I had fought so hard to escape? Had I just rebuilt the same house? Was I to be left tracking tired uncaught fantasies, wallowing in morbidity and the self-pity chant, "What about me?" This hollow self-deprecation droned in my ear only this time, my margin for error had diminished finding me at this chronological cusp of physical disintegration. This beleaguered and self-defeating mindset must be banished, submerged or - resculpted - bringing its obstinacy out of the unconscious - giving it a less gruesome, more palatable shape. Luca was the center of a circle of women as I re-emerged from the room. I took my place in the shadows. It would be impertinent and disrespectful to remove him now. The day finally ended. We had a fitful sleep.

Morning broke. Luca and I entered the courtyard to see that Mama was getting a pedicure. She was resting her blue-black lumpy stumps on the full lap of the pedicurist who was scrubbing the bottoms of her feet. My own feet cringed. Carmen was filling buckets of water to begin her ritualized mopping. Pochi and Estelle were already in the kitchen preparing the noonday meal. The hummingbird flitted in and around the flowers, the iridescence of his feathers shimmering in the day's particularly bold light. The sun bled onto my welcoming skin. I found it hard to believe that I was thousands of miles from home. Home? The German shepherd passed by, and he no longer cowered.

Later in the morning, Pochi made up my face. I allowed myself to yield unquestioningly to her easy, deft touches as she applied a myriad of bold colors. I refused the mirror. Only Rebecca, up until now, had had free reign with my hair

and face. We were all relaxed and having fun. Yta held Luca and looked on. Totally removed from the world outside, we were caught in a moment of early adolescence. I had only infrequently played in the world of girlish pleasure. It felt deeply good, I felt soothed, content. Antonio heated our indulgence. He returned, saw me, laughed approvingly and retired to his room. The spell for me was broken. My brow furrowed, and I broke away from the girliness, looking for Antonio. I needed to know the news with a particular urgency.

Thanking Pochi abruptly, I walked off, promising not to take the makeup off. Antonio's door was closed. I took Luca to our room to wait. I looked at him and wondered about his 16 year old mother and who his father was. I had a sudden desire to wander unnoticed in their little village to look at their textures, features, complexions, to sense their collective personality. I felt as if it was my past I had to unearth, dig up. I was suddenly uneasy with the blankness, the almost complete lack of knowledge about his origins. How could I extend these people without ever knowing their dreams, their beliefs? How could I take this child and raise him without ever having seen their footprints? I wanted an infusion of them not to reveal anything in particular but to know in which soil I now stood. Somehow we had merged. When we took Luca, we also took them. An undefined, undeniable presence would interminably loom above our heads - soundless, mute voices, would always be a nearly numbing drone in our ears. Luca's village, a remote and tiny speck on the map, skirting the Brazilian border was now a land in which we had walked. If Luca's birthmother never gave him a second thought, she would never be far from our minds.

I was overcome by an eerie feeling inside my head of what it would be like to never know what origins, what pathologies, what cries and whispers lived inside my bones. To have no identified past whatsoever - no tributaries of pain, of stories swelling my blood spilling into my blood. No irreconcilable gloomy mother's face

peering into a dream. One could dismiss a mother not of one's blood if she induced pain, suffering, and harm. I could be discarded if I hurt him. I had often thought wistfully that I had been adopted because no blood mother would treat me with such anguish and disdain. We had the wrong fit, my mother and I. I would try to attribute that to my being clandestinely adopted. Luca would have no ghosts to banish or resurrect. As we chose him, so could he freely chose the intensity and depth of his connection to us and our pasts. This, my child, would never be able to answer clearly when a doctor asked, "Family history?" I was melting with tenderness for Luca. Our past would now be his, but no, not ever exactly. Those seeds that popped up as nose, mouth, teeth, would forever hold secrets. My desire to go to his village was to gather up the faces and crush them into me, to have them oxygen starved rose petals after a prom. We were the record, the narrative, their stories were as good as our imaginations and as expansive and welcomed as our hearts could accommodate. Our little Luca who came to us virtually from nowhere was now an existential mate of chance. Our tie to him lacking a blood connectedness would be as tenacious and committed as one could ever be. No, I could never ask Antonio to be allowed to go to Luca's birth place, for I could barely go to the supermarket, and even at home I'd been shielded at the doorway by Antonio in a neighbor's presence. A request to visit his village was futile. Antonio entered our room, my stomach bunched up in knots. "Was I going with him to Stroessner?" I asked. "No," he answered. Not even he was going. He informed me he would go again after the weekend. My composure fragmented. He did not stay. Closing the door behind him, I stuffed the pillow into my scream.

The next day Pochi dressed in a clinging, short, red polka-dotted dress, with high-heels, exposed arms, her body merely draped. She had brilliant red make-up on her eye lids. Her hair was pulled back and hung loosely on her shoulders. She told me she was getting fat when I admired her. This was the first time I'd seen her

leave the compound except to go to the store. It was around 2 p.m.. I expected her to stay out all night but she was safely home before the afternoon was over. Liis walked about lost in her absence. When I had asked where she was off to, "To the dentist," she had answered simply. And the damn shame of it was that she probably did go just to the dentist.

While she was gone, Estelle and Yta and I went to the supermarket to replenish our baby supplies. Carmen watched Luca. We made our way circuitously around the streets avoiding the steepest hills. Yta huffed and puffed and fanned her face, exhausted even with the detours. Estelle was more stoical. She seemed unusually content and relaxed. Supplies purchased, we returned down the lumpy cobbled streets. No exchanges of greetings were made with other women outside sweeping and cleaning, even though Yta had lived in this neighborhood for a number of years. When we got back home, I found Luca fussy and unhappy. I took him into the room, fed him, and we lay down together. I went through my ever-expanding repertoire of nursery and folk tunes, some already familiar to him. Long dormant, childhood verse and song quickly resurfaced. I heard the children being called to eat. Soon I would be called. How I missed water and fruit. I felt the need to gobble down a whole bottle of scotch. Impatience and a loss of nerve would be my downfall.

I scoured Antonio's face when he returned for dinner. He was impervious and unresponsive to my pleading eyes. He played with the boys. I wanted to smash against my hybrid understanding, the impenetrable wall of words which kept me from ever fully understanding. I grabbed my journal and wrote furiously a barrage of words shot off the pen. I couldn't even think of anything wreckless to do to siphon off the tension. I felt combustible. I could be wreckless with words for the first time I didn't worry about anyone looking over my shoulder, real or imaginary. My writing had often been curbed, guarded and masked, half- expressed. My mother

was like a twitch, a pinched nerve perched on my shoulder, and my ex-husband cramped the pen in my hand with threats, for writing was his orbit. Aspirations of writing made me like a junkie, a malcontent, or a person of promises and inaction. But I had learned to write to draw the blood, to keep the heart maintained, to have an almost truthful partner for my penned-in brain. Now that was proving to be the legacy I had given myself that kept me here somewhat sane. The sisters had once inquired what I was doing. "Work," I answered simply. That was the extent of their probing. Was writing merely a safety valve, a decompressor or did it mean more? My fantasies when they were elegant and unencumbered spoke of writing to me. I was too aware of my mother's omnipresent and forbidding eye and too aware of writers of quality and stature, finally too unsure of myself, or too cowardly to ask of life that I invent myself as a writer. Writing here with a modicum of freedom and out of bare necessity, there was no alternative.

I was unravelling. Terror mounted me like a savage dog. Antonio had a male guest in the formal living room. Estelle brought me two hot dogs to eat in my room. This was the first time I had been sequestered in my room. She again believed that I was suffering because I was missing Frank when in actuality, I was dissolving, dissembling, coming apart because I now had a baby I could no longer leave, and a home, two grown children, and a job I had to go back to. I felt Frank to be with me, for once I was truly an assemblage of two people. A language I could not understand encircled me, menaced me, the static mounted in my ears, they were about to explode from a lack of understanding. I heard Antonio place a call to the Miami lawyer.

Suddenly a rage at Frank welled in me for leaving me with my muted jumble of emotions. I did not feel he abandoned me to the terrorist state, that could lash out at a hair-trigger minute and gobble me up until I was just a missing person on a missing list. No, I was enraged because he left me to feel and deal with all of this;

with this little bundle of person palpitating and breathing so sweetly and unaware in my arms or within the curve of my body closer than if I had carried him within me for nine months; with these people whom I seemed to know as well as I have known anybody and whom I could not understand; and with the lawyer, a person of extreme fascination, palpably erotic and noble - in whose hands the fate of our family rested.

In great defiance and at great risk of angering Antonio, I entered the room with the guest having not been invited. Antonio asked me to sit down. He introduced me to his guest, a man between thirty and forty. I was offered a sip of Scotch from a communal glass. All the focus turned to me. As if at a grand inquisition, or a performer in a circus sideshow, I was asked a string of questions by the guest. How old was I? How old was Frank? Why was I divorced? How old were my two grown children? We went from the personal to questions about New York and how much a variety of items cost: cars, TV.s, computers. I was then asked to guess the gentleman's age. Forty I said. No, he was thirty, he answered back. All the while the glass of Scotch continued to be passed around. Antonio's eyes were now dancing with pride and pleasure as they looked at me. I guess my risk had paid off. The evening broke up at midnight and Antonio with a change of plan, took off mysteriously yet again for Stroessner. He left with the guest.

Estelle informed me after they departed that the guest was the brother of one of the judges who must sign for our release. That he was the brother of one of the gentleman who held supreme power over our lives and destiny. She said that the guest assured Antonio of his brother's support during the course of the evening. So this was how things worked in Paraguay. Were they different, in truth, anywhere else? It was the personal touch that was going to get us freed, and perhaps some distribution of money under the table. I shuddered to think how my lack of control and my inability to stay in my room could have jeopardized our situation. Antonio

was such a deliberate person, and I had acted out of line. I wondered what retribution, if any I would get for my intemperance.

Antonio was more, much more, to me than a knight in shining armor. At times, when I thought I might be out of here and home I would feel the burgeoning weight of emptiness, the blank sad space I would harbor for Antonio whom I might never see again. Connected to him, like a child to a mother, like a girl with a crush and thick erotic fantasies that could never leave the corridor of a dream. I knew that at some point I was going to have to live the rest of my life without Antonio. By freeing us from our ensnarment with the legal system, Antonio would also be freeing us, severing us from our need of him. At times this became an oppressive reality I couldn't bear to fathom. I pledged that with Luca, I would be loyal to and sustain his spirit. Luca already acted with his lustiness and exuberance. If the signatures were not forthcoming by early next week, enabling us to complete the adoption process taking minimally another three full days, our next chance for the resolution of our appeal could come after another fifteen working days. By now I knew, that fifteen days in this country could mean forever.

Chapter 22

The day was bogged down, heavy with anticipation as I took my watch like a hand-wringing ship captain's wife, an uninterrupted gaze outward my heart conscripted, I waited Antonio's return from the treacherous high seas of the Paraguayan Court of Appeals. In Paraguay, I had come to learn, everything rested on the needs of the President to keep himself fat-rich and in power. I who for so many years had practiced independence with a vengeance now was as dependant as Luca. How did I leap from being an unmitigated victim of unattended Sundays to being a drooling piece of pasta hanging limply from the indifferent lips of a dictatorship? A painting stuck in my mind like a amulet, a touchstone, a highly polished mirror. It was of a naked figure running down a barren late October tree-lined street. The street was quiet, hushed but for the last remaining falling leaves. It was nearing dusk. Shadowy images of houses could be glimpsed through the trees. The houses seemed to be holding their full complement of people and therefore unreceptive, not waiting for more. Sunday meals were in progress. The figure fled into his solitude or ran wildly about because of his solitude - his exclusion - because I imagined no family waited or missed or wanted him.

At almost precisely 3 p.m. on Sunday, as regular as the week falls, Frank's mother and grandmother invited the family to sit down for a plate of pasta and gravy - as they called it. This is inviolate. There were no invitations. One was just expected. A place at the table was set. As one trembled in the presence of a powerful vision, so did I respond when I saw that painting. Whether it was called "Fleeing from Sundays" or I named it that I do not remember. But it resonated with my fears like a Siamese cat yowling at breeding time near the moon. Sundays were now pasta and gravy at 3 p.m.. Luca would be an eagerly awaited addition at the table. My Sunday blues were now abated, tied down, shackled, appeased.

Since being with Frank, Sundays were no longer formidable or frightening. Did the seed or idea of a Luca start in me as I viewed that painting, that accidental viewing, in a Sunday Soho gallery? Was that my moment of truth, a test of my tolerance for solitariness and aloneness which are natural habitats, breeding grounds for loneliness. So much of my life had gone into the practice of solitariness. It was my covenant, my vow. It was my persona - my philosophy. I weaved it to my life like a delicate Belgian lace - like a spider spins a web. Being alone was the natural and necessary and unavoidable condition of man. One got born alone and died alone. That bit of self-obvious contrition became my governing principle. As a superficial interpreter of existentialism, I knew that my obligation and responsibility to myself was to create my own meaning. That thrown out by god or rather by throwing out or discarding god, one had to monitor and answer to oneself. I worked hard, practiced solitariness and aloneness. It was my creed, my doctrine.

Luca gave me family once again. Luca gave me pasta and gravy on Sundays at 3. With Luca had I obliterated, denied my essence, my essential self? Was I in fact fleeing from Sundays? Or was it possible to build a family, to have family to abate loneliness to feel and have love and still maintain an honest and truthful alliance to this natural self? The self who got born and died alone. Was family merely a buffer or supplicant? Did I indeed escape and try to hide myself, shield myself, protect myself by again creating, having a family? Or had I run toward love toward - loving and being loved - and in that found my greatest freedom? Was loving and needing the hardest choice to make knowing that life ends alone, sometimes abruptly and surprisingly? Was it my triumph to want to give all and to take all without fear or restraint? Luca I was believing was my most unfrightened choice. Perhaps I was fleeing from Sundays when I knew I needed to have Frank and a Luca in my life. But the Sundays I fled were caught up in brittleness, little sticks of

tinderwood - a reluctance to give because of what I could lose. "The world will be saved on a canvas," a painter friend once shared with me. I was closer to understanding why I had found myself in Paraguay. I was building up again to carry forth, to carry on with whatever it was that was dealt me. Pochi's husband was visited and sensing my tautness, he tried to humor me. I could not listen to the content of what he said, but hearing his English soothed and pacified me. He and Liis finally went off together to play with the computer. I knew I must leave the last Saturday in September, no matter what, with Luca or without him. I could leave Luca with Yta. I knew, without a quiver of a doubt, she would love him and keep him safe. I would become yet another mother leaving her baby to board away from her side and heart. And presumably like many of those other mothers, the springboard for this abandonment would be my own inability to tolerate the ambiguous and the uncertain contaminating and tormenting of my burgeoning and bonding heart. I choked the emotions unleashed by this latest resolve. They pushed against me with the force of an erupting volcano. I was losing control. A heaving sob throttled out of me. Turmoil was eroding any effort to maintain my forbearance.

Luca lay next to me blowing bubbles with his saliva and gurgling. His unwavering infant certainty and confidence in me whipped me into a further frenzy. Estelle arrived home and dutifully flung some Paraguayan takeout food on the table for me. Out of Antonio's sight, sensing my weakening state and the fact that I was fraying and perhaps dissembling, she allowed her irritability and resentment to color her hospitality. By now her brother-in-law had gone and Pochi and Liis had retreated to their room. Antonio finally called from the office. It was obvious from her entrapping seductiveness that it was he on the phone. Receiver back on the hook, "Antonio," she simply said. I was furious at him, wondering how he dared not come straight home to me from Stroessner with word of our fate.

Experience had told me that his inability to appear did not bode well for our immediate circumstances.

Estelle swept down on her boys, amassing them with kisses. Her presence was curdling in my stomach. She epitomized everything dreadful, everything that filled me with the disgust I felt whenever I was in the company of anyone smug, self-satisfied and doubt-eschewing. I did not want to be tolerant. I wondered how men like Antonio were captured by women like Estelle. Antonio may have given up the seminary but he certainly did not give up his need for a high priest. Out of clerical robes, did Antonio need his exuberance, his wild side tampered, held down by a person who had such an obdurate and unflagging nature? Did Estelle have to become this inordinate weight to balance Antonio off? Estelle was perplexing to me. She was the sop for most of my discontent. Did I rile her up or was she just surly by nature? Did she feel threatened by me or sense undercurrents of feeling that Antonio had that were directed toward me? Was it troublesome to live with a man like Antonio thereby thrusting her into erratic behavior in his absence? Did she flare up when with him as a way to siphon off her real displeasure and inner-struggle and tension? Why was it so hard for me to reach out with a sisterly empathy and compassion toward Estelle? She made me want to tear my hair out or gauge out her eyes. She drove me to that kind of distraction. Was it mutual? Estelle, I knew by now, reminded me of my mother and I lost all forbearance and inner-resolve when this occurred. Our language difference kept us from sharing, kept us apart. Then, I needed an enemy at times to energize me, to keep me going. Estelle's abusive behavior at times provided such a spark.

I returned to my room with Luca and to keep my vigil for Antonio. My resolve had intensified to leave Luca with Yta. I would no longer endure being treated by Estelle less well than a char. Without generosity of spirit, I was lost. My heart spasmed with a thick gnawing pain as I looked at Luca and thought about my

plans. I was getting self-righteous, refusing to continue being a pawn of this demonic, undecipherable system while latched to the trifling hands of a resentful hostess. Frank's words the evening before his departure repeated in my ears. No, I did not want to be a "Mother a la Paraguay", drenched, absorbed, focussed totally and unilaterally on mothering. Tongues incessantly and totally taken up with conversation centering on children. Children given great lead and then ravelled back to arms groping for meaning. Little Orlando, I believed, had found in me one female who did not swoop down on him to wipe a nose, tug an ear, or intrude on a fantasy. Rather, we shared in unsparing, simple direct ways. There was no underlying need to impose or intrude on our relationship. At home, fantasy had no room in the lives of children building interminable skills. Here imagination could predominate as long as the children were available for validation. Mothers here needed to grab on to sweet unsettled dependent flesh for validation when losing balance to thought or the heat of a creative rather than a procreative passion. My mind raced. Luca's unaware baby breath sent another forgotten lullaby into my throat. I found myself crying as I sang to him.

The atmosphere became charged with electricity. Antonio arrived. Estelle met him with a warm greeting. He knocked on my door, entered, took my hand, put his thumb up in the air and told me that I would be going home very, very soon. I believed him, but was still a bit on guard. I needed this time to be reassured with details, none of which could be forth coming because of this peculiarity called language. I had to wait to talk to either Frank or the Miami lawyer to learn the larger implications, to get the specifics. Antonio asked for my nearly empty bottle of estrogen. I had mentioned in passing that I was nearly out. Taking the bottle, and leaving the door ajar, he almost too rapidly left the house. I was too distracted and worn out to read more into his offer to replenish my supply of estrogen, my lifeline to youth since my hysterectomy. Yta, Pochi and their daughters and the dogs

were around the kitchen table. Observing them through the partly opened door, I wondered if women in New York who had less were not better off. At least they could run off to catch a movie, a play, go dancing, or sit at a bar. Here there was nothing - bleak, unremitting nothing but what the eyes could find within the immediacy of four walls. The lawyer from Miami called wondering what was going on. I told her that Antonio informed me I was to be leaving very soon but that, obviously, I knew no details. Yta asked me after I hung when I was leaving. "Soon," I answered uneasily. I did not want to betray my excitement or become overly zealous, and something inside me remained skeptical because I did not yet have all the details, and because the lawyer in Miami was calling the house and probing me to get information. I sat with them in a relatively comfortable silence, finally giving Pochi an English lesson while Yta watched giggling. After a reasonable time, I excused myself and went to bed, Luca wrapped snugly in a bunting by my side.

It was eight o'clock on a dreary, cold and rainy day. I raced out to have my waiting coffee and quickly returned to our room. I was not yet ready to face the family. It was a Saturday, and I was not going home. And Tuesday, the next flight out of Paraguay, would not find me on it either. Monday I would have to bargain with Albert at Air Paraguay once again to reserve seats on the next two flights out, the following Saturday and then Tuesday. I had caught a terrible cold and sore throat and had flu-like symptoms, achy and thin-skinned. I was afraid of infecting Luca. I was gobbling the Vitamin C I had with me and drinking unboiled tap water. Up until then I had asked to be served only boiled or mineral water. Never trust water in a foreign country guide books tell us. Still, in a self-protective attempt to become as unobtrusive as a dot or shadow on the wall, I decided to drink their water and to use Luca's cloth diaper to blow my nose, so as not to further deplete their hard to come by supply of toilet paper.

Settling into my resolve, I heard scuttling outside the door along with some unfamiliar male voices. Estelle knocked and entered. The toilets had backed up. She told me I must no longer flush the toilet paper down the toilet when going to the bathroom. The paper had to go into a little bucket next to the toilet. The plumbing could tolerate nothing more than human waste. I was mortified. Why hadn't they told me sooner. No wonder they looked askance whenever I asked for more toilet paper. They were afraid of just such an event and did not want to further dislocate me. Estelle informed me of this with the competence of the officious, showing no emotion, no fuss. Satisfied, she smiled and closed the door.

With this piece of information, I wanted to flee, not because I couldn't conform to the restrictions of the plumbing but because I could no longer stand being an object, something to contend with. I wanted out, to get away, to never have to see or hear Estelle again. Though she was at her best in times like these. I had to find ways to depend on them less, to intrude sparingly, to become airless, weightless, dimensionless. I wanted to pull away and into the shell of my own room. I no longer wanted to be friendly or pleasing. As I got to feel a fixture, an appendage to this reality so did my desire to disappear as a presence in Casa Antonio seem to be intensifying. I did not want to let them know I had a cold or felt as badly as I did. I wanted to divert attention away, so as not to be caught up in the coarse performing, dutiful hands of Estelle.

Chapter 23

Antonio came home. He had gone to work for the morning. Estelle was fat with good humour and female wiles. Again, it goaded me to see Antonio such a cipher in the hands of Estelle. I reluctantly admitted to myself that I was jealous of the attention and receptivity he lavished on her. If, indeed, it was true that one grew to love a captor no matter what the treatment or circumstance, I saw that I had fallen in love with Antonio. This collapsed upon me, fallen scaffolding. In a moment of naked truth, I knew that if I had to stay here, that I wanted to stay here as Antonio's wife. The flu, the runny nose, the scorching throat, the chills was this truth surfaced.

Frank called to bring me up to date on conditions, the source of his information being the Miami lawyer. It was expected that Antonio would go to Stroessner at the beginning of the week at which time the panel of three judges, one of whom was the brother of the man Antonio entertained, had promised to rule favorably toward us. They would draft a resolution which should be sufficient to resolve the case. Once again, my optimism surfaced and a wave of excitement poured over me. Frank believed that one way or another I would be returning home on the following Saturday with or without Luca. He refused to allow me to continue staying there. The risk was too great, and he wanted me home by his side. I weakly reciprocated the sentiment feeling the angry lips of betrayal to Luca scowling inside. My resistance was worn down, I appeased rather than protested. We would go back and get Luca at the appropriate time, he said discursively and emphatically. This triggered off a litany of self-pity and complaints from me in a deluge. I told him how I hated Estelle and how badly she was treating me and how I resented being left here alone to deal with this and that I was sick and weary and could no longer cope. Taken aback, he responded by saying, "Easy, easy." This

further flew me into a rage. After a brief swell of combativeness, I calmed down and asked how things were back home were. It seemed that his dissertation advisor was pleased with his manuscript and exceedingly encouraging and that he should continue as is; that our friends had been uncommonly supportive; and that my parents were characteristically pessimistic and engaged in painting darkness and gloom. We ended on an even note, he believing that within a week one way or the other I would be back with him.

As the day slugged on, it was apparent that the tone in the house had definitely changed toward me; there was an element of self-consciousness and detachment, a coolness. It was obvious that I was not to be included in the family plans to go to San Antonio later in the day. Pochi, to counteract the chill, smiled broadly, a subliminal message of support. My parents called. My mother losing her self-control, shrieked, "We want you home. Come home immediately. You are our only daughter. If it is so nice there why don't you stay there, maybe the baby isn't just three months old, if he's getting teeth." I had mentioned something in passing to her about Luca possibly teething. "I have a terrible forboding something dreadful is going to happen," she concluded. Never had her need for me been so unbridled, nor the complexity and discomfort of her feelings. Not wanting my flu to become evident on the phone, and not wanting her to sniff out my crumbling courage and demeanor, I excused myself in a gracious and understanding way.

In the aftermath of the phone conversations and the family cold-shoulder, I shut the door of my room and tried to regroup around my trembling and shaking body. My face averted to limit the spread of my infection. I looked wistfully toward Luca to pull us back together and to regain the fortitude and strength to carry on. We headed for the terrace, the sun finding an afternoon light, the hummingbird flitting in and about the flowers above my shoulder. I told Estelle meekly about my cold, she looked back sympathetically and asked if I needed or wanted something. I

feeling progressively worse, sneezing incessantly and my stomach suddenly felt upset. Yta came to claim Luca and me to bring us across the street to her apartment. I could not refuse. She had been promising to bring us there since we arrived at Antonio's.

It was a modest flat with one large partitioned room and a small kitchen on the third floor of a small apartment building. Yta and her daughter shared a bed. What happened when the child was a son, I wondered. She gave me good strong black coffee and proceeded to take out all of her family photo albums from her wedding day to her daughter's fifteenth birthday celebrated with a religious service and a party. This was a major milestone in a Paraguayan girl's life. Yta was surprisingly slender, sexy, and beautiful as a young woman; a kind of vitality and excitement came through in the pictures. With age, and without her husband, she had become plump and twittery. Her husband, an extremely important and powerful officer in the palace police corps, handsome and attentive then, was now nothing more than a memory existing in a fading photograph. He had nothing to do with either Yta or their daughter Ani. Occasionally he would call Antonio to see how they were and to send along a little money. He was already a number of wives beyond Yta. Repeatedly, I thought of asking Yta to come to the United States to live with us and take care of Luca. I knew that was what she wanted to do. It became nothing more than intimations; something in me warned of talking in specifics.

For the first time since I arrived in Paraguay, I was genuinely not feeling well. I had strong stomach pains, a dripping nose, and achy joints. As Yta became more open and garrulous, I had to exert more self-control to keep my symptoms under guard. I did not want to offend her or turn her off; she had been nothing but kind and generous to both of us. She told me that she was worried about supporting herself now that the informal system of foster nannies was being closely monitored by the government. Nannies were in danger of being arrested and thrown in jail, if

they were caught, she went on. This bit of information jolted me. I thought about the fact that Antonio and Estelle's desire to build a family foster-nanny business to back their adoption practice would no longer be possible. How times had changed for them even as I had been there. The little family run hostel for babies awaiting adoption had indeed been short lived. Yta and Pochi now were financially dependant on Antonio without being able to provide a service in return.

No wonder why Yta and Pochi and Antonio were engaged in the talk of setting up a beauty parlor in the front section of the house. Would the avalanche of money that fell into this house also be blocked as the government moved into the world of international adoptions I wondered? As I visited with Yta, it was becoming evident that my need to stay in Paraguay with Luca until the court case was settled was a non-negotiable necessity, having less to do with emotions and more to do with a political reality. I now had to stay with my infant son to protect him from a flexing police force and the changing of the lucrative and informal adoption business. With each adoption, Antonio made considerably more than the average wage earner in Paraguay did for a year. As I tried to grapple with all of this, I was feeling progressively worse. It became clear why Yta had brought me to her home and was sharing all of this, even if at great risk to herself. It was evident that she wanted to protect me.

We returned to the house. Yta and Ani were going to watch over me while Pochi and Liis went out to celebrate a birthday dinner for Liis with her father. Pochi had spent the better part of the day getting ready. First a yogurt preparation on her face, followed by lemon and sugar which she applied to her hair. Her nails, feet and fingers were carefully manicured and painted. She was seductively fragrant in a silhouette fitted dress. I was again taken with sadness at the plight of the women here. With skin swelling around wedding bands, tokens of a historical moment past, they were left to care for a child or children, their all encompassing source of

meaning. Love, if it ever had existed, was too dangerous to even fantasize. Spending endless time coddling and preparing themselves over and over as if to pretty up their own corpses for a viewing, the vanity never to be responded to by some man's loving or seductive eye. There was an unabiding pathos to it all. Pochi and Liis left with a flurry of good wishes. I retired with Luca to our room. Ani and Yta settled into the living room couch to watch the "Purple Rose of Cairo," on TV.. This fanatic dictatorship which owned and controlled every avenue of communication, had approved this movie as suitable for its people! Woody Allen beware!

This particular night I found that I couldn't keep my mind off Frank. He anchored me against the unfathomableness of this predicament. I needed his strength and directness, now particularly, as a counterfoil for my mother's mounting and relentless morbidity and narcissism. In the darkened room, I tucked Luca under my arm, trying to breath away from his head so as not to infect him. My fists curled like a rooster's claw around my thumbs, I tried to sleep feeling a million miles from everywhere and inches from panic and dissolution.

In spite of my cold, I felt happy and relieved to waken in a house emptied of Estelle. Pochi was already busy preparing Sunday lunch; she was belting out some syrupy love song along with a raucous radio blasting. Liis was playing near her with her Barbie dolls absorbed in draping and redraping them in original creations. The sun beat off the golden flowers in the courtyard. The hummingbird flew about. How clear and calm things were when not shadowed by the enormous presence of Estelle. Yta had left earlier in body clinging pants, spike shoes, and heavy makeup to play her regular Sunday bingo game in San Antonio with her family. Ani, Liis, Pochi and I sat down to a feast of beef Milanese. We were comfortably silent. I was touched by the special lunch Pochi prepared for me. Her command of the situation was quite striking given her usual remote and reluctant manner. It was obvious

that she, too, was bridled in by Estelle.

As the afternoon settled around us, it became increasingly apparent to me that I was physically and emotionally no longer able to stay at Antonio's. Now without a doubt I knew that I had to remain in Paraguay with Luca until the case was resolved for emotional as well as practical reasons. I needed to come up with other alternatives. My tolerance for Estelle had eroded. I could not wait out this situation in a balanced and deliberate and calm manner in her presence. She tapped into deep, uncomfortable places in me that resonated of an unhappy past. She was the prototype woman to topple me; her cunning manipulativenness, unpredictable emotional outbursts, and inability to respect the boundaries of another reduced me to the level of an incompetent child. I thought of returning and taking up semi-permanent residence at the Hotel Cecilia but knew that was financially not feasible. I thought of asking the pediatrician if I couldn't take him up on an earlier, possibly off-handed, invitation to live with him and his family in exchange for providing some kind of service or work.

Pochi inched in on my contemplativeness and began talking about how expensive life was in Paraguay; medicine, schooling, milk, and food. She said it was boring. There was never anything to do, no place to go; and that there were few men to meet, since there were seven women for every man and divorce was not possible. She watched Liis play as she talked, and I saw that Liis kept her alive. I wanted to be able, in vain, to tell her that even in New York without a child to care for, many women would disintegrate or disappear into their own despair. Children were often a foil, a reason to go beyond themselves, to stay. I believed that without children many women would just evaporate. Many women with children suffered from all kinds of bizarre manifestations of depression but managed to cling if cliff-hanging to some sort of responsible existence. Perhaps it was relationships that drove women wild, an entrenched inability to live either within or without the

context of them. Was the servitude to the children or the man? Perhaps it was those women who freed themselves from the desperation involved in being dependant on a man who could use or for whom the children gave shape, reason, or meaning. Once the possibility of relationship ceased, what meaning then did children hold? Was the unencumbered relationship less complicated and more realistic? Pochi was the kind of women with whom I wanted to air these thoughts. I was interested in knowing her reactions and insights. Words were not how we could talk and communicate.

Pochi took me into the proposed space for the beauty parlor which had in it equipment and must have been rather recently an active beauty shop. It was apparent that she and Yta would work in the shop and not Estelle. She looked pleased at the prospect of this becoming a reality. Walking by the dogs, practically ignoring them, we went inside for some coffee. It was interesting to see how little attention was paid the dogs in Estelle's absence. Pochi and Liis pulled out some sketching paper and proceeded to draw a series of clothing designs for women. Pochi shared that at one time she designed clothing for women for a living. Liis's preoccupation with draping her dolls became understandable. Pochi drew a dirndl, a pant's suit, and a fitted dress among other things; all of them quite dated. I showed her how I wore boots, long skirts and big, oversized jackets to work. She laughed and sketched some designs along these lines. How eager she was to learn more of the world, how inevitable her enduring provincialism, her interminable lack of exposure.

I was caught by the knowledge that she would one day recede into the background of my life, I not wanting to remember and contend with her unremitting sameness. I was feeling better. Pochi had been the elixir for my cure. I could not lose myself to sickness or weakness. A universal and intuitive femaleness had become the palliative. More than anything aside from Antonio's

great magnetism, I would remember this as a time of women. By seeking a baby, another child to love, I had found mothering and nurturing and sisterhood for myself.

Chapter 24

Estelle, Antonio, and the boys returned in the early evening. By then, I was tucked in my room for the night. Estelle entered the room with my thermos bottles filled with freshly boiled water. She said that Juan had a cough. I gave her some of Luca's cough medicine, then she opened a new can of powdered formula for me. Antonio was preparing to take the midnight bus to Stroessner she informed me and we said goodnight. Her solicitousness was unsettling. Antonio must have had some words with her. She was being particularly hospitable and caring. After she closed the door, I took out the volume of Latin American women's poetry that I had brought with me. It was the perfect antidote to her unsettling solicitations; it pulled me back immediately to my center. This book, "The Renewal of the Vision, Voices of Latin American Women Poets, 1940 to 1980," jumped into my hand at a visit to The Hungry I bookstore in San Francisco.

The poems were like words on fire, so intense the passion. An unembarrassed resilience and buoyancy held up the words like lily pods on an even pond. These women needing also to constantly stave off the vagaries of political evil. I had identified with these women long before I had come here and now I felt their voices wailing beneath my feet each day as I paced this soil. The men filled them with their seed and then robbed from them - a baby was often not safe from a father. Women knew they had protect their young as the day lit up. Why did women persist in producing babies, a bounty for fortune seeking adoption lawyers, or as soldiers, pawns for politicians succumbing to impotence and age? The arched, starchy nurse had said coldly when she handed us Luca, "You are taking a son out of Paraguay." I had not then fully appreciated her words.

Unable to sleep, I looked through the other books I had tucked in with my belongings, "Swann's Way," by Marcel Proust, "Kaffir Boy," by Mark Mathabane;

Isabel Allende's book, "Of Love and Shadows,"; and "Serenissima," by Erica Jong, which I had found on Rebecca's book shelf. Along with my pad and pen, these books had become life sustaining, they kept me gripped to a larger reality dimmed so easily in this situation. I again began to leaf through the poems in "Voices" particularly those which spoke of love and aging. I seemed preoccupied once again by the relentless fear that on the edge of this new and happy life my face, eroding with age, would be unattractive and unsettling to Frank a man yet to peak in his sexiness and handsomeness.

My age that bone of contention, that stabbing reality, that thing I wore on my face, that wedge that every so often poked like sharp jeddy rock between Frank and me, that bit of intemperance and fear that flared up into percussive and doomsaying words from Frank. Frank who sometimes when he held my face tenderly would pull against my chin as if stretching canvas just to look, to see. Frank who occasionally would wish aloud that I were younger and who once asked if I would ever consider getting a face lift. These the terms, the bittersweet edge. Nothing in life was ever unproblematical. I found in the poems that even women looking for postings of lost and most probably stolen children still were not distracted from the sags and lines which stole the ripeness and succulence from their faces. How harsh it was that jaw lines got to be draped as if by used, creased and crushed paper bags? Losing youth was particularly hard on women. Men must look beyond a face forming itself into stalactite-like overhangings known as jowls and then plunge into a dryness like parchment to reach a remembered and still punctuating soul. How did I put myself into such a predicament? Where was my mind, my rationality, what mocking was I condemning myself life long to? What kind of hiding, and double-speak could I use to veil my face? I was reluctant to subject my face to a surgeon's rife tools for political, adamantly so, obdurately so for political reasons. My face condemned to perennially finding itself reflected in a floodlit

mirror. What depth of love would have to blind his eyes? Mired by these ominous thoughts the weekend dovetailed to an end. Truthfulness purges and subdues. I was ready to face the unpredictable week and not be deterred.

The sun was unabashedly bright. The smell of chili cooking filtered through the air, as I sat watching the hummingbird, close enough to cup, while Luca cooed. Antonio was in Stroessner, Carmen cleaned, the sisters all chattered in the kitchen cooking, the boys hid in shadows, and I wrote in my journal. My appetite waned from little exercise, and I was overwhelmed by the interminable mother's fatigue that followed a twenty-four hour demand feeding schedule along with the daily vigil I had to keep each day concerning fate. Liis and I sat together building models of Paraguay and New York out of Lego blocks. She was very curious about the world outside and was always plying me with questions in the very limited English taught her by her father. I told her that Luca was named after a Renaissance painter, Luca Signorelli, which she intimated she understood. There was something rare about Liis. Her imagination was sufficiently extensive and expansive to withstand the toll of the dictatorship. Both her mother and father fostered its life and development. Their hopes for her were to be shielded from and protected enough to have an active and lively life of the mind, they did not speak of more.

The day just went by. The early evening churned up with the wild and excited play of the boys and their cousins who were visiting with their parents. Estelle was particularly happy whenever her brother and his wife came over. There was a symmetry in their life-styles and values. Yta and Pochi seemed outside the curve and sat on the outskirts of a very raucous conversation, removed; perhaps it was because their marriages were not intact. I went easily and without notice into our room.

Propping Luca on my stomach, I found him to be more handsome and beautiful by the day. The click happened; Luca had locked on, life without him now

seemed intolerable and unimaginable. We were at the point of no return. Never again would I be able to chose my life over his. Perhaps that was the purpose, the higher meaning I sought and needed and found in mothering? Would I never stop questioning and probing my motives? Must I have this interminable inquisition within to withstand the curiosity of family, strangers, and friends? My bond with Luca now was beyond the verbal. It was my body which had given him birth! Luca had his bottle, and then we had some good old- fashioned nurturing. As he licked and sucked on my breast, I wondered about whether the foster nanny wet nursed him. I hope she had. I did not hear Antonio arrive home. The day had been relatively clear of curiosity and impatience. I was feeling as if I was gearing up for a long stay.

The next day, before we awakened, Antonio and Estelle had left for Stroessner by car. At dawn the house had that particular lightness that existed in Estelle's absence. I was given black coffee again this morning. Pochi and Carmen knew that was how I drank it back home. This was a personal gesture, a strong message of support from them. Pochi, in mime, demonstrated how coffee like that would rile her to wild and crazy deeds, and stalked over to Carmen whom she playfully strangled. After taking a few steep swigs of the, admittedly strong coffee, I rose to strike out after Pochi. We were dancing about and giddy with laughter. Pochi grabbed a broom and chased Teti whose bones were nearly exposed he was so thin and lean, through the house. In and out of the courtyard they dashed, the boys who had emerged from their rooms were doubled with laughter. Pochi then turned on the radio which screamed with volume and belted out the words to the forlorn love songs. The house was jumping. Liis, more quiet and reserved, was relishing her mother's playfulness. Luca like a wide-mouthed baby bird on a tree joined in lustily. The shards of glass would splinter and burst off the courtyard wall with much more of this high-pitched hilarity. Pochi was now holding Teti's tail between

her legs as he tried to slink off. His paws made skid marks on the newly mopped floors. Carmen mopped after them with a vigor untainted by resentment or anger.

Pochi then commenced to prepare the noonday meal twitching her rear in rhythm to the music like a horse swatting flies with its tail. Yta entered and getting caught up in the spirit of the morning gathered up Luca and twirled around the courtyard. What a chilling and repressive force Estelle was, how much the dictator, how suffocating her presence, how exhorting of wildness. My eyes welcomed the abandon. My heart was its comrade-in-arms. This, alas, was the weapon in our arsenal, laughter and music and bodies tumbling free. The hummingbird undaunted and poked around the sap in the golden plants along the terrace wall. Lunch was served. Pochi made stew and empanadas. It was delicious. We ate in easy harmony. All of us at the table together, even Carmen. Yta took a couple of extra empanadas for Ani who was still not home from school. We were united in a bond of motherhood. The meal completed, we retreated to our rooms to rest. Yta lay on Estelle and Antonio's bed with the boys. If I was at times tottering at the mouth of hell, this morning surely was graced by the timeless and enduring. I felt genuinely happy as I lay down next to my little Luca. We fell into a deep and unproblematic sleep.

After naptime, Yta and Pochi came to claim Luca to give him a bath. Laughingly they told me I get "zero" for bathing Luca, that I couldn't hold a candle to Estelle's clean scrub. Estelle was forever demonstrating to me how to bathe Luca. Yta and Pochi were regaining ground, getting the upper hand for me with this bit of humor. I watched on most appreciatively. They imitated her down to the littlest swathe behind the ears. I could never, even with years of practice scrub Luca the way Estelle did. My hands didn't hold that kind of confidence. This mocking of my ineptitude and her admonitions exhilarated us. We were still buoyed by lightness and laughter as Pochi's husband appeared, earlier than usual. Seeing him, my jaws

snapping open as if a mouse trap, I blurted out unexpectedly, that I felt as if I was imposing here. I was taken aback by my openness. I didn't know where that came from or how I had let it escape.

Suddenly I couldn't trust my mouth any longer. I became wary and solemn after I realized what I had shared, though he just listened understandingly. Perhaps Estelle's absence and all the frolicking had forced my guard down and indulged this confidence. Having said this, I was in tears. I excused myself and went off to our room. I was always so damn close to dissembling. I just couldn't stay here at Antonio's house much longer and could never, ever leave Paraguay without my Luca! There was no longer any choice for me about that. Never before had I been in a predicament that had come so close to resonating with the tragic. I knew that if Frank called right now, I would not be able to go to the phone. My sobs became an acute nausea. To abate the nausea I wrote.

Life finally welcomed me to its bosom
Indentured to a bond, I can never deceive
Love came in the conditional
I responded, there was really no choice
Incarcerated by the wiles of openness
I receive like a communion wafer, my fate.

These thoughts reared up in me as if to reiterate the circumstances that I had built, and now must live out.

Frank called later enough for me to be calm and subdued. We fought on the phone, inevitable by the weight of the emotion engendered in this situation. I was disappointed, there was no apartment sale or movement of the apartment; he went on to tell me about his life, his job, friends he had seen, his conversations with

Rebecca and Jeremy. As the conversation continued, I became increasingly incensed that there he was ensconced within the orbits of our lives together and that here I was entangled in our collective and mythic predicament. He rebuked my anger, my disturbance reiterating his ultimatum, that I was to return the following Saturday with or without Luca. He was no longer going to let me stay there because of the potential danger involved and because he wanted me home. He no longer wanted his wife in residence in a terrorist country. He sounded as if he were quoting Jeremy. Luca would be safe with Antonio and we would claim him when the issue was resolved. This incessant debate was fugal in its reassertions. Without missing a beat, I told him that I would never leave without Luca, never leave Luca behind, that I wouldn't and I couldn't! I had, of course, said similar things to him before, but never with such absolute vehemence and resolve. We hung up. I knew without question what I thought, what I wanted, and must do. The conversation clarified everything for me.

Estelle and Antonio returned home, everyone rushed to greet them in the living room, they were laden down with packages. Normally, I would have stayed in my room; now I wandered out with the family to participate in their return and the examination of their purchases. Luca was sound asleep. Antonio came over to me, kissed my cheek, and told me that one of the judges who promised to sign the judgment today was sick with the flu and therefore unavailable for signature. I took this setback, this news with surprising equanimity. I was no longer plotting with each set back for an escape. I was in there for the long haul whatever that was. Estelle never seemed as happy as she was when she was acquiring or buying something. Today, while she was in Stroessner with Antonio, she stocked up on black market underwear and household goods. Antonio seemed pleased to have her so happy and excited.

Having had my fill of bath and beauty products and underwear, I excused

myself and returned to my room. It was uncanny how the mood changed with Estelle around. Even Teti resumed a place and posture of prominence in her presence. These sisters had a strange link to each other. Without psychology, they act on preservation. Estelle provided the protection and family sustenance they needed. Antonio was the father for their children and their closest contact with a man. How strangled they were, how muted by her. Was she this dominant in their childhood? Or did she just turn out luckier? The contrasts in their demeanor when she was not around were quite stunning. Their lives were absolutely determined by their need to keep and protect their children. Were women who had children anywhere in the world very different I wondered.

Chapter 25

Luca and I caught the sunrise. The hummingbird was there already. Antonio was in Stroessner. No one else was up yet. Carmen soon arrived and fixed me some black coffee. In the early morning, men arrived to work on the house. Estelle was geared up in earnest to renovate and repair the house. This was the first day of Paraguayan spring. Today there was no school. Liis had a friend over and as always was self-directed and involved. Pochi sat with me for a cup of coffee. She began to tell me how her husband was no good. He fooled around with other women and hit her, and that was why she moved out and left him. She must have seen me confiding in him the evening before and felt it necessary to share her story. Pochi, the most reserved and remote of the sisters was nearly a friend. We communicated so much more than our faltering and limited words. I listened appreciatively, and felt bold enough to ask her if she had any other boyfriends or lovers. "No," she said. I knew that she could never divorce her husband and that she was conflicted about him. Each day she took such painstaking measures with herself before he arrived to visit with their daughter Liis and then exhibited extreme agitation each night after he left. I asked her about Antonio's legal assistant who one night brought a bouquet of flowers for her, and the man, about twenty years her senior who had visited her a few times very briefly in the courtyard. She smiled weakly but said nothing more. I rested my hand on hers, a volt of communion surged from one of us to the other. The wails of women betrayed are the heavy rains in the world.

Estelle seemed particularly chipper and more mellow this morning. She informed me that she had placed a call to the U.S. Embassy to arrange for the processing of my papers. It was a Tuesday. Again a plane was missed. I still had reserved seats for Saturday and for the following Tuesday. I would be booked on every flight out until I was able to leave. By now it was just a force of habit. Albert

merely waited confirmation from me. There were an additional three days worth of paper work if I was to leave on Saturday. Estelle, I surmised, must be feeling confident that I would be leaving on Saturday or she would not have called the embassy. Estelle asked me to call the pediatrician, to alert him to the fact that the end was near. The pediatrician informed me that he could not examine Luca until he had Luca's Paraguayan passport in hand and that could not be forthcoming until the judges in Stroessner signed off on the case. He reiterated the offer that he had made in the past to have Luca and me stay with him and his family. For some reason we had also captured his imagination and he, too, was willing to step into the treachery to protect us. I had never mentioned these offers to Antonio, and for the most part banished them from my mind. Even the consideration of them was a form of betrayal and disloyalty to Antonio. Only my inability to tolerate Estelle threw me in that direction.

After my call to the pediatrician, and feeling an upswing of impatience with the situation I asked to be excused to go to our room to try to resettle in. False hope was the tyrant within me. After a while, I joined the sisters on the upper terrace, not to be daunted and scared off into solitude and isolation. The sisters were sipping tea out of a communal aluminum cup, listening to music and talking comfortably. Estelle was as relaxed as I'd seen her. They were happy to have me join them. We passed the dictionary around and had one of our word by word translation conversations. Luca was the focus of our talk, how beautiful, how blond, how fair, how happy. We were enjoying each other. I blended in, a sort of foster sister. I began to regard my time here as something of a luxury. Here my meals were served, I got ample rest and fresh air, had no direct responsibilities aside from tending to Luca and then, even his food was prepared for me, our laundry done, our room was cleaned. There was nothing for me to do but to care for Luca and think and dream - a perfect captivity. How often had I longed for such an opportunity? It was not the

first time in my life that I had been perfectly sequestered.

In the early years of my first marriage, my husband and I went to live in a German Swiss alpine village where he had spent a year of college and where he was now doing his doctoral dissertation. It was here that I lived nearly imprisoned in this small in-grown community. We lived in a converted mountain spa. My husband immediately after arriving left me on my own to rejoin this secure and exclusive community. And I was never welcomed in, and remained very much an outsider at the age of twenty-three. It was an exquisite kind of exile. I spent two years rarely speaking to anyone, playing the cello some four hours a day, and, taking a flask of schnapps, would explore the mountain trails each day. My ex-husband, who did not bring me into the fold, also would not let me out. He wanted me to be a shadow by his side. I had an eerie replay of that time.

The sisters seemed particularly relaxed in my company, they could feel my resistance ebb. There was a lightness and conviviality in our camaraderie. Carmen and Pochi bantered as Carmen stood above and aside from the us ironing. In a way, Carmen's life was enviable; at the least she left these four walls each day and had a viable job. She appeared a woman with a modicum of independence and freedom. Carmen went to make me my late afternoon coffee. It was nearing dinner time. A donkey-driven cart appeared to haul off some amputated tree stumps from the front yard. Estelle enjoyed relating to workmen. Yta came to fetch Luca to give him his bath. I relaxed with my coffee and journal on the terrace, allowing myself to even feel a little pampered. The boys and I were given a light supper, some salad and some leftover luncheon meat. We had formed quite a sturdy relationship. Juan, the younger of the two, sat on my lap and asked to play with Luca's rattles and toys. Orlando asked me to sing some favorite songs we have shared.

I had never been sure how aware Antonio and Estelle were of my relationship with the boys. Perhaps my being with them was taken for granted. I

felt I had found a special place in their lives, particularly for Orlando. He so often found himself in our room, usually to get some toys which were kept there, but often lingering to sing a song or two. I felt he was often being badly treated by Estelle. Either she was tugging him by the ear to scold him or she was covering him with what appeared smothering embraces. Never did a day pass without Luca being taken for a stroll in his carriage around the courtyard by the boys, and often they had him with them when they were playing. Luca had found a real place in the family. We had reached harmony and unity on this day.

The evening brought another visit from Estelle's brother and his wife and their two daughters. The burgeoning night crackled with the excited sounds of children dashing. We were all settled around a small table on the terrace. Feeling particularly at home and secure, I sat in for the visit. By this time of day, I was usually feeling cowed and overwhelmed, and needed to be sequestered in our room to keep my revolutionary emotions in check. Suddenly as if in a burst of thunder, Antonio jutted in wildly waving some documents. He kept kissing the papers as he wove in and out of our circle. "Solution, solution, solution!" he called out repeatedly. Grabbing me as if in a football hold, he kissed me over and over on the top of my head. Everyone was cheering and saluting him. The children gathered round. They ran excitedly in circles. Everyone was jumping up and down, even Luca, infused by the moment, was waving his arms with great excitement. My eyes were glistening. I sat very still. I felt Antonio's grasp on my head, my heart was palpitating. I was not yet not ready for a public display of effusiveness. The dam was about to burst. The waiting had come to an end, we were going to be free to leave. I was going to be able to take Luca from his native country. We were going to be able to leave on Saturday.

Estelle got a bottle of whiskey, I gulped as much down as I could get away with. Frank called as if he could hear our hoots and hollers in New York. He said

that this was the happiest day of his life and to tell Antonio that he loved him and would never forget him. Frank said that he would call our friend in the State Department to see what she could do to have the U.S. Embassy expedite the processing of our visa papers so that they could be done in less than the normal 48 hours. Antonio went out to get some barbecued chicken and yucca to celebrate. Not daring to leave the circle, I grasped the fact that within a few days I would no longer be here among them. In spite of my mother's forboding, no evil struck. I had kept a wall of faith about us, although I could have allowed myself easily to have been dragged into her premonition, her prophesy.

Luca was asleep in my arms. We had finally retired. The celebration at its end. Our hearts beat in perfect consonance. I thought soon I would be leaving this place of blankness. This place encapsulated in a thirty-five year reign of terror with most of its population too young to remember life without a dictator. In the past would be people whom I had known and a life I had lived. I would have within me the knowledge that a group of people, at one time like family, lived in a sanitized, anaesthetized environment in which the impurities brought on by art, music, dance, painting, literature, and the theater had been cleansed. That a people existed living just above the base line of poverty and hardship, and had only to watch the young grow old and the old die. And that these individuals had found personal sustenance in these events. That these people did not have even a jutting mountain to challenge them, or the insolence of natural disasters to worry about and prepare for. That they lived in and with unabashed nothing. I would know and remember this as I walked around bombarded by opportunities to be provoked and challenged. I would remember their attentiveness to one another as I again joined a world in which it was too easy and seductive to lose track of intimates. It was hard to sleep, imagining I was out, and knowing I still had some bureaucratic hurdles to cross.

Antonio left early in the morning for the police headquarters to pick up

Luca's passport and police identification card. He had said he didn't need us there. Within an hour of his departure, the quiet in the house was penetrated by the shrill ring of the phone. Estelle beckoned me to gather up the baby, his bottles, a change of clothing while she ordered a cab we had to meet Antonio. We got into the cab and Estelle instructed the cab to get to police headquarters as quickly as possible. I held tight to Luca as we rushed along cobbled streets. When we arrived, we dismounted the cab and put on our police headquarter demeanor, steady, directed, unobtrusive. Antonio looked relieved and happy to see us. It seemed they needed another thumb print from Luca. I was then asked to sign two official logs, after which Estelle and I walked out calmly and waited in Antonio's parked car.

Moments later, Antonio arrived, got into the car and pulled away from the building, as we round the corner, he juttet his thumb up in the air and yelled out "Success! Success!" excitedly waving the passport and police identification card. We were driving, as if being chased, to the United States Embassy. We had to get there before noon. It was 11:35. Estelle was eroding the moment, warning that we would never get through by Saturday. On a hair trigger, she then began to wail and moan about the intricacies of this case and how it had eaten into their family life and into Antonio's practice. Her tirade was so clear to me, that I almost believed I could understand Spanish perfectly. Antonio listened, "Estella, tranquilo!" he told her.

We were there on time, admitted through the gate and found both the counsel and the associate counsel involved with a line of people behind the glass enclosed counter. Upon seeing us they looked up and nodded. I blurted out to the associate counsel in earshot of the counsel, that the case was settled and we were now cleared to leave the country together. Finally, our turn came, the associate counsel promised to expedite our papers and get them done by Friday and said we could meet with the counsel the next day for the official swearing in, necessary to secure a visa for Luca. She asked for the obligatory \$150 fee and upon seeing my

money said rather sheepishly that the bills that were not fresh and new and thus were not acceptable. "Where did you get these, on the black market in Paraguay?" she quipped. But, in fact, we had to produce new bills or the bursar at the embassy would not accept them. This potential stumbling block was hard to take seriously, but we promised to return with new money. Once outside the embassy, Antonio and I had a side-splitting laugh. Having gotten the blessing of the Paraguayan judicial system, we now had to contend with an obsessive United States embassy bureaucrat. Estelle reluctantly joined in.

Back in the car, Estelle broke into a form of hysteria in which she lashed out brutally and uncontrollably at Antonio. I felt like a small girl sitting in the back of my parent's car. "Nervosa," Antonio looked my way through the rear view mirror. She was attempting to penetrate his pride, steal his thunder. We needed only to find some new money, have Luca examined by the pediatrician, return for some kind of oath-taking procedure with the counsel, and then collect our completed visa package, all possible to accomplish, I believed, in the remaining two days before Saturday. Estelle was claiming that it was impossible. As we drove back to Casa Roux, I looked at Luca, lively and hand waving and knew that he was more, much more than a combination of my egg and Frank's sperm, that he was an action, a leap of faith.

In the afternoon, Antonio, Luca, and I set out for the pediatrician, without Estelle. There was a spirited atmosphere in the car along with that edge of tension that is often present when a man and a woman were alone. Antonio played Julio Iglesias and we drove brusquely through the streets of Asuncion. Antonio casted around for females to admire and beckon. Without Estelle, he was unrestrained and boundless. His behavior resembled that of the sisters out of Estelle's company. What a titan of suppression she was! The pediatrician had made a special appointment to see us. He seemed genuinely pleased and relieved to have us there.

Luca once again immediately warmed to him and smiling allowed the examination to proceed. Antonio and I proudly watched on, Antonio helping to remove Luca's clothing and diaper. The pediatrician had brought us through a potential syphilis scare with Luca, cradle cap, fevers, a possible exposure to whooping cough and had been instrumental in my being able to successfully perform as a mother in Estelle's home. He had, perhaps at great risk to himself, given our forebodings about Paraguay a grounding in an ominous reality. I had particularly deep and strong feelings for him and was rife with emotion as I watched him examine Luca.

At the completion of the exam, after Luca was dressed, he asked us to sit down while he filled out the necessary forms. It seemed that Luca went miraculously from the fortieth percentile in his basic measurements to the eightieth percentile within three weeks. "This is truly a love baby, a miracle of love", he told us. "Your husband will be proud of you," he went on. Taking my hand shyly in his, he said, "Luca is a beautiful baby. And, you have a smile now." Antonio beamed as he shook the pediatrician's hand, he guided my arm as we left the office building. Antonio and I were bursting with pride at Luca's growth spurt, a testimony to our strength, control, and tenacity while at Casa Antonio. To accompany and sanctify the drive home, Antonio put on a tape of ecstatic Guarini songs. Antonio stuck his head out of the window and whistled at an attractive, young girl who turned around and waved. We both laughed.

We then stopped to get some required photographs of Luca for his visa package. Luca, as if aware of the moment, beamed proudly through the sitting. I thought as we drove to home, how Frank had found this little speck of a person somewhere near the edge of the world and that now I was about to bring a lusty, plump baby boy home. Antonio burst from the car with Luca and me trailing, to share the news about Luca's statistics. Everyone in the house was filled with pride. Each of us had a hand in this amazing growth. And Luca's life drive, his life force

was one to be reckoned with. I tried to reach Frank on the phone to share the news with him, but did not find him home. My Uncle Joe and Aunt Thelma coincidentally called, and promised to fill Frank in on all the good news.

This was the next to last night I was to be in Paraguay, here at Antonio's house. I excused myself from the evening festivities. I wanted to begin placing a transitional distance between the family and me. I began packing the clothing that Rebecca helped me select, always insisting that I make the final selection winnowing all items down to three choices. She had taken the opportunity to mother me.

Outside in the courtyard there were sudden wails. It seemed that Estelle hurled the tiny kitten found by the boys over the wall. The kitty, only days old, had been wrapped by the boys in soft cloths and was being fed by them with an eyedropper, filled with milk. Salvaging the dropper from Luca's cache of medical supplies, we had rigged up a way of getting food into the tiny kitten's squealing mouth. Antonio had been seductively appreciative of my inventiveness. The children were all stunned with disbelief. This would be a unforgotten moment in their lives, I thought as I listened through the door. I was once again perplexed that Antonio could have taken Estelle for a wife. Was he that thwarted and crippled in the monastery? Did he need her admonitions to drive him? Exhausted, I placed Luca next to me and went off to sleep early. Tomorrow was to be my last full day in Paraguay.

Chapter 26

Early in the morning, Antonio and I and Luca set out for the United States Embassy where I was to take the oath before the counsel. We brought the crisp, clean money. I had the new bills in the house. And picked up Luca's photographs on the way which were beautiful. As we waited our turn, Antonio shared the story of our case with other lawyers present; they listened attentively, shaking their heads at appropriate moments, looking on most admiringly. The enormous stress and tension Antonio had been under was now evident. He was almost transformed in his demeanor. Antonio's stature as a local attorney would rise because he brought this case to resolution. The counsel called Luca and me in, told me he was happy the case concluded successfully, informed me that a person in the State Department had called about our case and asked that we be given special consideration in concluding our affairs here, and told me that he thought Antonio was a very fine lawyer. I listened without responding, lifting my right hand, swore my testimony, shook his hand and left. The associate counsel promised to have our papers ready by three that afternoon; a record amount of time. Preparing the visa packet usually took 48 hours.

As we drove back from the embassy, I told Antonio that his son, Orlando, reminded me of him, that Orlando was part poet and part warrior. Antonio laughed in agreement. Veiled lightly, it was my way of sharing with Antonio my feelings about him. I had not until now allowed myself to be as explicit except with an occasional unabashed stare. Flirting or anything which hinted of the seductive was unthinkable in a situation fraught with so much danger and fear. A crush would have been contrite. Fantasies would have nipped at the underpinnings of our necessary focus. No it was much more than love that I felt, or it was a love which lived in the inexplicit, the untold. Like Emily Dickenson, I could only view

Antonio from afar. From Frank I learned the virtue of the unspoken. I knew that I would miss Antonio, that I would always miss Antonio. Who had loved me more than this? Who had without question trusted my worthiness so? Only Luca, perhaps, would trust me more and he without choice. What had I given or could give Antonio in return? A searing chill wound through me. I would never see Antonio again, he would never know about Luca and his well being. He would have to release us from memory as we would he.

How preposterous the size of the world is. We were in that unity which comes if rarely when two persons were as if having one being, one soul. I believed Antonio felt this level of union as well. We drove home in silence. Lunch was the house specialty Milanese, though Estelle's couldn't rival Pochi's. At 3:30, Antonio, Luca, and I headed back to the embassy to pick up our completed visa package. This time the silence was getting more difficult. We were distracted by the Iglesias tape. For both of us, our breathing was labored. Words mounted like snow before an avalanche. Just one or two more rides together before Luca and I mounted the plane on our way back to the United States. I was glad we did not share a common language because I could not control saying things I would regret. And although the lack of a common language spared me from the irrevocable, it stripped me down to the sounds of breath which belie words. I was totally, painfully cognizant that something was coming to an end. And who was ever fully able to prepare for or comprehend the fact that things and relationships can and do come to an end? My measure would be the grace and self-control with which I handled the last day.

When we arrived at the embassy, the associate counsel proudly handed us the much desired visa packet. We shook hands, and she very warmly wished us well. Heading for home, we cheered and hooted and screamed out the window as we drove. As we raced up to the house, a dour Estelle waited outside for us. She climbed into the car and told us that the associate counsel had called and that the

visa was out of order and that we had to return at once to the embassy. It was by now after five and the embassy was officially closed. However, we were going to be allowed back in. Estelle again lapsed into one of her agitated tirades as Antonio headed back for the embassy.

Once inside, we were informed that the medical report signed by the pediatrician and necessary for entry into the United States was inadvertently left out of the sealed package in their haste to get it completed, and that although it was highly irregular, and nearly illegal, to open a packet once it was sealed, the counsel, who was watching, had given his permission to open the packet and put in the medical record. It seemed we would have been turned back at Miami if this hadn't been included. The associate counsel went through the elaborate process of opening and resealing the visa, apologizing all the while, and saying that this was the reason they didn't like to rush. Once again we bid goodbye. The counsel escorted us to the door and wished us good luck. I knew it was the call from our friend in the State Department which got him to release himself from the iron fist of bureaucratic procedure to help us out. Back in the car, even Estelle smiled, she was soon to be free of her obligation to Antonio of take care of Luca and me.

This night things were quiet and anti-climatic; Ani and Yta and Liis were all dressed up to go to an event at their school. Antonio brought in barbecue. Unfamiliar friends visited. Luca and I sat quietly and enjoyed the meal. We were not to have the big evening out, the big bash, as Antonio had promised. We would not, as we had intermittently discussed, have Luca christened and given Antonio as a middle name. Most of the family had disappeared, I exchanged toasts of scotch whiskey with Estelle, Antonio and the two strangers. Pochi was no where about. Quietly Luca and I slipped off to finish our packing and to prepare for our return flight. The sky was particularly black with a single orange star and a nearly full moon. Even the sky was blank in Paraguay.

In the morning, Antonio sat with me and went over the papers I was taking with me. He said that he would hold them until we get on the plane. Carmen was cleaning. The boys were playing, Liis was sewing clothes for Barbie, and the sisters were preparing lunch in the kitchen. Mama had come by and was inspecting the flowers on the terrace as she flicked her cigar ashes in the dirt. We sat down for lunch. Everyone was stealing glances at us as if to fix us in their minds. Mama was holding Luca who was cooing and waving his arms. I kept smiling back. Antonio shortened the lunch by saying it was time for us to go. I went into the room to gather our things, looked at my face in the mirror and hoped that after Frank looked down at the baby that he would not look up at me repulsed and disconcerted by the revealing and undeniable signs of age. Frank had not called. I pushed any anxiety or concern about that out of my head. There was still too much to focus on. We bid goodbye to everybody. They crowded around the car. Carmen gave us a big hug and kiss, the boys let me kiss them on the top of their heads, Liis and Ani and I shared embraces and then Estelle gave me a genuinely warm hug and kiss and wished me good luck. Pochi stood to the side. I grabbed her and we held on for a moment. Yta was accompanying us to the airport. Antonio told me as we pulled off that Yta wanted to come to New York to help take care of Luca. I promised myself to investigate that possibility.

On the way to the airport, Antonio haltingly said, "I want you to be very, very happy in the United States with Luca. You have very much to give Luca." I was piercing him with my gaze. "My home is your home," he went on. And after a heavy pause, he said, "You are very, very kind!" It was as if a speech prepared with the dictionary. Every word was weighted and selected. My eyes scorched with tears. I wanted to beg him to let me stay. I felt I could not leave his side. For moments our eyes locked. I knew that Antonio did grow to love me.

Antonio took perfect care of us to the final goodbye. He walked our papers to

each station and then after a brief wait and a quick coca cola, he escorted us to the plane. Luca and I hugged Yta and she stood sadly off. Antonio handed our ticket and papers to the attendants at the entrance of the plane and when he could go no further he cupped Luca's face and kissed him squarely on the mouth. I then kissed him respectfully on both cheeks and grabbed the last look before goodbye. As I started to walk into the plane, Antonio grabbed my face from behind, turned it toward him and kissed me strongly and squarely on both cheeks, and then off we went into the cabin of the plane.

At precisely 4 o'clock the plane took off. As we lifted off, I stared hard at the vanishing town of Asuncion and the country of Paraguay. Luca rested wide awake in my arms. I could barely breathe. The birth of my third child had been the hardest and most hazardous of all. As I lay Luca down on the vacant seat next to me, he was gurgling, making bubbles with his spit, kicking his feet, flapping his arms, and cooing. I fixed on him to ease the distancing of this reality, this moment in time which was soon to be removed, archived in time.

I was returning home with my son, my second son, and third child. A span of twenty years separated my children. I could no longer conceive of life without Luca, as I felt my life devoid of meaning without Jeremy and Rebecca. Being a mother meant being a warrior. Passivity and indifference were its enemies. Something deep inside me had rightfully wanted this, to do this again. At times when I had asked myself why, I learned that it was the way I mothered, nurtured, recaptured the still wanting child in me. I knew that having this kind of commitment was necessary to me. I craved its eternal and ethereal nature. I watched the moon glint off the snaking waters of Latin America, as I returned home. Tucked by my side, I saw my lively son. Perhaps it was for this look, this kind of absolute trust, that I craved yet another chance to raise a child. I was having myself be totally taken up by Luca. Thoughts of Antonio and Asuncion were

receding into the background. I was releasing them from consciousness. The baby was a spunky, lusty little fellow, spirited and humorous and incredibly loving. Without undue sentimentality, I saw Antonio in him. I gathered I would find a lot of Antonio in him. Comforted by this, I began playing with images of our welcome in New York. Frank's excitement, the traffic from the airport, and our first night home, three abreast in our room, watching the jagged baby breaths, listening to the careening cabs and the loud music engulfing our building, just west of Broadway, throughout the night.

NEEDING FAMILY NO MATTER WHAT
1992

AFTERBIRTH
1998

LOSS
2003-2013

*No one who lives long enough can be surprised to find their biography has been molded by distant events, by other people's wills, with little or no participation from own decisions. Those long processes that end up running into our life –sometimes to give it the shove it needed, sometimes to blow to smithereens currents, like tiny shifts of tectonic plates, and when the earthquake finally comes we invoke the words we've learned to calm ourselves, **accident**, **fluke** and sometimes **fate**.*

The Sound of Things Falling – Juan Gabriel Vasquez



NAOMI BARBER

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TORAH BY HYMAN BLOOM

INTRODUCTION

Needing Family No Matter What is the story of an adoption of making that choice and of what followed. It was written over a twenty-two year period and is divided into three parts: *Needing Family No Matter What, 1992; Afterbirth, 1998; and Loss, 2003*. It represents *only* my story my side of things my understanding and my reality.

On June 13th, 1988 Luca was born. Nine weeks later to the day Frank and I adopted him at a brief but legal, assured by our lawyer, ceremony before a Paraguayan judge in the City of Stroessner, Paraguay. *Needing Family No Matter What 1992* looks back to the earliest days of 1980 to understand how the decision to adopt Luca came about. Drawn from journal pages it goes on to tell about the first few months Luca and I spent together as mother and son in Paraguay.

Rereading *Needing Family No Matter What* in 2003 I see Frank my husband of three months at the time of the adoption and Luca's adoptive father increasingly as a figment of my imagination. This exploration into my subterranean unconscious agitates and alarms. At what levels of deceit and denial I let myself live. The unraveling of illusion the churning up of the past can become unmanageable and crazily disruptive. I became the wife of a man whom I believed was a physical necessity in order to maintain the health of *my female parts; sex keeps you young* I had read in some woman's magazine. Husbands were in my mind devised for Friday nights and Sunday mornings as buffers caretakers personal trainers escorts but not as friends' lovers and mates.

At forty-eight I became a mother for the third time sporting the glint of a gold band on my wedding finger I was *Sadie, Sadie married lady* a Barbra Streisand *Funny Girl* ecstatic moment. Rebel whispers what do I need a husband for doubt a crow picking the scrim off the illusory. If I want need another child an infant I can go get one adopt. Superfluous sanctuary of horror he climbed me parasitic I willing host. Spring thaw juices running life palpitating a husband the elixir. The problematic was *love* not motherhood. Love was broken down into the elemental the solipsistic the non-threatening and the least mystifying. When confronted by the possibility of love I switched off not willing to break through to rapture and desire. I did not *know* until just recently that love was life's blood. My emotional center disallowed for more than fleeting unremarkable fantasies of true love. Fixed so to denial dug in intransigent intolerant impatient becoming a wife was a way of remaining alone and was the safest venue for my unexplored heart. This was the second time I married someone without a real name or face or with whom I had no real attraction affection or connection a force of habit or a force driven by a riveting and entrenched unresolved childhood.

I have always told my daughter Rebecca and my son Jeremy *that serious life defining decisions are never really made, if you're patient, they just reveal themselves.*

Unreflective of and counter to my own pearly wisdom my decision to adopt Luca and marry Frank had more to do with fear than with the courage and the forbearance to wait for the revelation. The opera *The Mother of Us All* with music by Virgil Thomas and text by Gertrude Stein, ends with the final line *Do you know or do I have to tell you?*

I *know* now that marrying Frank not the adopting of Luca was based on a very faulty and fraudulent intra-psycho premise.

Afterbirth-1998 recounts events that took place almost a decade after Luca was born when he was ten and I fifty-eight. Under a distant but perennial Latino sun my fate and therefore ours took or tumbled into an erratic course. Predictable? Probably. The house built on flagrant dreams and false promises toppled. The past ripped through our lives with the force of an angry improbable tornado. Exhumed the weighty body of the unexamined, me. Yet stunned by the sudden disconnect the synaptic break where a false move became a truth. Our lives as a family blown asunder and then falteringly our coming back together rearranged the subject of **Afterbirth.**

LOSS-2003 is the story of sitting with Frank as we watched our son Luca fourteen battle a life threatening attack of *ulcerative colitis*. Kicked up like bad dirt all of the excruciating and mentally tormenting feelings about Frank that I had tucked away in a manageable place since our divorce five years ago. Sinking overtaken by grief and horror I a mother sat by her child's bedside watching the forces of life and death collide. *Usually Eastern Europeans have this disease many Jews* our Indian from Bombay physician informed us when first diagnosing the *ulcerative colitis* only a year earlier. Lulled by a brief period of remission we were ill prepared to confront the menacing unpredictable cyclical nature of this disease. Luca our found child lay in a hospital for nearly four months wasting away racked with unimaginable pain until his septic perforated colon was cut out of him. Luca in the year 2003 at fifteen without colon and as our genealogical narrative goes part *Guarani Indian* part German with maybe now a splash of *Jew*.

*Sometimes you miss **the time*** a man reflected plaintively as he along with a group of other Palestinians traveled through Israel in the year 2000. Depicted in the documentary *Inner Tour* these individuals over a three-day period visited sites within Israel that represented what they knew as their *greater ancestral Palestine* and on top of which Israel now grew. The driver was Israeli and the guide Palestinian. *How did Israel become such a country?* Wondered one of the members of the tour? *Sometimes you miss **the time*** the man reasserted.

*Sometimes you miss **the time***. What else or who else would I could I should I have chosen for a mate? The questions are futile. The past taunts oppositional sinister and mocking. I liken myself to some women I remember seeing in a Japanese movie that unquestioningly spent the entire day ascending and descending a precipitous mountain to *keep* buckets filled with necessary water. Somewhere in its essence the word *keeping* holds the secret and the promise. *Dilsey endured*, in closing *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner ever informs.

In a present tense: Keeping and enduring as Luca prepares for his second surgery in which they reconstruct his intestines so that he can be rid of *the bag* or more medically correct the *colostomy apparatus*. Occasionally he muses that *he is going to die that he doesn't have much longer to live*. The fear of the surgery and the final knockout possibility looms. Post surgery, perhaps once again, he will commit himself to becoming a pre-eminent world-class tennis player.

Fiscal realities loom necessitating my rejoining the work world having left it to care for Luca. *Mom, I'm more independent now. You can get a part-time job. And then after the surgery, you can get a big one, like your old job, earning \$100,000 a year.* He told me recently as he walked toward the car to be driven to school.

Each day I *kill* myself and then walk away. I *know* I am not yet ready for the moment of final darkness to set in. Now my irrevocable indomitable and singular hope is that Luca live and live and live to be a tottering and fulfilled very old man. I want to think or

believe as my life comes tumbling down and flashing before me in those last unaccounted for minutes that in the end *I did **not** miss **the time**.*

Disclaimer: None of the names in this narrative have been changed usually veiled with slight adjustments, i.e. Nora for Naomi

Naomi Barber
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AFTERBIRTH
1998



Explanation Update: **2012** and I am having enormous difficulty reading this no less editing. To probe decisions and choices we make and on what basis when choosing to have a family born to us or found? Motives are never clear but here to tell the story of one man and one woman who came together for a multitude of reasons that took a child from deep in Latin America to construct or have a family. What follows in the aftermath the life day in and day out. Hearts cold to each other welling manic love for the baby in basinet learning when love is absent between the adult's critical cultural and religious differences cut into the heart and soul of the child.

Naomi Barber
b. 7/17/40

The year is 2003 and I am unbelievably to me sixty-three. Looking back again at my life as if it were a series of stills I am struck by the incompleteness of it all. I see that time did not wear well with me. Now pain and amazement roil my blood in equal parts choices always at cross-purposes with the little ground hog nose of mine pushing through the hard soil of wintertime. Never more than skimming the surface of self-knowledge I lived in the contingent and expedient. To keep balance I skittered about never following where my heart wanted to be. I couldn't listen to its pleading beat. Peeling the blinders off my eyes I am stunned by how obviously off base I was with myself.

Here in this still I stand before an Episcopal Priest in a lovely small chapel beneath a sun drenched rose window within the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine peacocks roaming the biblical gardens promising myself to a man to whom I turned originally because I read or heard somewhere that sex was necessary to stay young and this man at least initially seemed not to mind making love to me. That already is a gulp and a wince the

girl who thought she was fat ugly and stupid at twenty as she shared with her psychiatrist who sat looking at a girl one-hundred-twelve pounds with men streaming behind her as if irresistible cat-nip and about whom her college professor said, *you are unquestionable the most brilliant student we've had here in the last ten years*. Ouch at nearly forty-eight I felt grateful that a man even subliminally not quite fully revealed and repulsed by me would stand here promising himself to me for life beneath the rose window before the Episcopal priest. In this still I sink further from myself the pronoun I getting further submerged below a thick flotilla of denial.

How was it that I did not know that it was the real living breathing I who was linking heart and mind and the rest of my entire life with a man who virtually held his nose but not his stunning as in stun-gun surly and bating tongue when anywhere near me. So Luca was brought into a marriage of false gods false promise idolatry my urge for completion and for normalcy driving me to my knees before the altar of the marriage god. I just wanted to ride on the subway to work with an inner secret smile having made love all night after sharing secrets and glasses of wine and a warm sudsy early morning shower one with the hurly-burly of a brilliant morning sunrise. Imagine being forty-eight and still unborn and imagine further being sixty-three and finally letting my birth cries out. And imagine living life numb a purple morning glory that obstinately stuck to its vine never opening even once to the softness of a dewy summer dawn I was born on a mid- July soft morning. The tone of self-pity the stills all hold pools of regretful eyes the sight more confused and occluded pearly cataracts closed over like infant sacs of new birth fluid never drained off or released.

In this retrospective accounting we were married April 16th, 1988 almost three months to the day that Luca was born June 13th of the same year. Luca having been conceived deep within the unruly branches of rain forest in the village of the broken bridge, Pointe Yhu, perched high on a ledge above of the fiercely tumbling waters of the Iquatzue Falls. It wasn't until his birth on June 13th 1988 that his sixteen-year-old mother Lucia came to Stroessner where the pre-arranged delivery by a mid-wife took place. On the wings of parrots and thick tropical vegetation Lucia quickly vanished back to her wood framed house on stilts to gaze across the tangle of trees above the Parana River and across to the banks of Brazil. The crackling sounds of the fierce unremitting toppling Falls to mute her heart's loss. Stroessner widely known as the world's black market capital is where our little Luca spent his first nine weeks swaddled just beneath the urgent guns of police like so many caught-up fireflies, infants waited to be designated either for black market if home grown, stolen across borders, or willingly given up by their Paraguayan mothers. Fortunately for us Luca was considered legally *abandoned* by his birth mother not taken by force or bribe across a notorious ungovernable Brazilian border.

In Paraguay an unmarried couple from another country cannot adopt a child. One must be married three to five years before an adoption can take place. Paraguay with a dictatorship that rivaled history's markers for longevity and a Catholic Church, which dictated and sanctioned behaviors, had arbitrarily positioned those perimeters. A letter from Frank's cousin, the priest, attesting to the fact that we had lived in a committed relationship for at least seven years did the trick.

Time jumps erratically in this still I muffle my cries anticipating the full abrogation of his wedding vows. He dragged his poignancy from girl to girl as if in search of life support a feeding tube a soulful profligate *a good man a very good man*, as often he would refer to himself with great theatrical flair. In a time capsule with an up close look in on marital cheating in Italian yet fully assimilated working class homes it seems an expectation. The women cope with electric shock and fastidious clasp to routine pasta with gravy at three on Sunday to which the men show up and then fall into caves of sleep. Dishes barely off the table and scrubbed of remnant tomato residue the aftermath of a good meal with coffee and Cannoli. Following hours later around the time of the football game men in tee shirts leaning over point spread sheets made in secret alleyways. The bitterness is palpable and probably as good as those damn half-aspirins keeping my heart beating and my blood pressure in check begging if a heart attack or stroke *god please oh please* adding insult to injury no messy death.

Tolerant and blindly devoted a St. Bernard just rolling over hoping for a tickle or a rub unquestioning the small cheats the scamp getting progressively more emboldened. He must have thought he struck gold I could type I had connections I carried the possibility of a much coveted lambskin within my hands. My friends in the academic world would eventually affix a Ph.D. to his name with mind numbing mumbles that he was much an *academic feral child* and I the female version of a cuckold. But my lard encased body, a Joseph Beuys' knock-off sealed in the howls the screams the agony of a woman so flagrantly spurned and betrayed. But there are lines that get crossed even by the numb and near emotionally dead a woman has her limits. I had mine throwing gulps of super proof *caipirinhas* down over a glazed dish of *feijoada* I lost it over the Brazilian national drink and peasant dish. The final straw and I am getting way ahead of myself in relative time I let his roaming eye and kissing lips feast while I lay dormant by the front door slobbering and panting for years or lifetimes. He had me caught up in the logic of his bipolar amorality progeny of the Catholic Church where vows and sins could be washed away by communal wine and a little white wafer. I fell prey to the espoused goodness of an ex-choir boy lapsed catholic who crossed the harsh and brutal waters of the Harlem River to come to me and I had believed as a lapsed and befuddled Jew that only Jews called fish chicken and chicken fish to suit their purposes.

Ironically looking backward it would have been simpler for me to adopt Luca as a single woman. Lodged like food between bridge and gums I recall the social worker who did our *home study* and who was legally blind recount two recent successful relatively uneventful adoptions in Paraguay by single lesbian New York women. The women coincidentally were not connected except by virtue of using this same social worker. Here kicked up and promptly suppressed that unexplored part of me. So subliminally rendered lesbian women adopt I who still hadn't figured out *why sex?* And with rapacious unremembered dreams like cement blocks on my feet could I have adopted without Frank? Be a lesbian? Maybe at forty-seven I was just another stunted teenage girl getting pregnant virtually to keep my man to keep from staring at blank needing to hold a quivering bundle to not fall off the precipice. Maybe I got caught off guard by the word lesbian still in the subterranean layers of my consciousness. Or maybe I did it to keep

Frank or please Frank and further yank the dark hood over my entangled neck to not face or know that I should never have submitted to promises and vows in a Church of all places and cut off any possibility of ever forging a foot in a right direction. Every time I have fooled myself into believing I needed someone and some spurious connection that I believed was vital to my life as if a ventilator I rekindle the process of self-annihilation self-immolation.

Because Frank had been christened we were able to get married by an Episcopal Priest in the socially conscious Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The wedding ceremony was singularly traditional. In every version of the wedding ceremony Christ was front and center. We selected the text that mentioned Christ twelve and two fewer times. The engaging wily priest asked us as is necessary and customary to write some pre-nuptial essays about why we wanted to be married which are included evidentiary in this text. Not only were my daughter and son not invited to the wedding they were never mentioned in my essays. Did this omission foretell my being dumped ten years hence that remarkable story to come. My father played the violin at our wedding accompanied on the piano by his lifelong friend Marion who was so much more than a lover to him and who had played the piano at my first wedding November 11, 1962.

For the purposes of chronology my father died on April 16th on our 10th anniversary and when he died he had no real hard evidence that the marriage had broken into a million difficult pieces as he was soaked in the disorder of dementia though he did know if he never said so that Frank never came with Luca or Rebecca or me to visit. In the fracture of memory we had said all of the essential truths out loud *she was not a good mother to me and my six-year younger brother and not a very nice person* to which he submitted *I don't disagree*. Imagine admitting or recognizing that for which you lived your children you subjected to the harshest and most cruel kind of mothering Cinderella's step mom was *a barrel and a heap* of lovingness compared to our real one. But all of that is in the past and how it shaped my future rests like clipped coupons in my treasure box. Jesus did after all have the final say Jesus of the wedding service twelve times over the covenant of marriage broken in the deepest most biblical and inviolate way adulterer adultery *you shall not commit adultery* and so on and so forth. Even at his memorial service when my father was just a sheaf of wind-blown lacy ashes spread at a pond-site in the Catskills Frank was present front and center the secret of our break-up yet to be widely shared. My children all knew however each having had their noses rubbed virtually in Frank's heavily scented love affair.

Eight years henceforth Frank had been stuck in the dung of raw obsessive love since he had wandered off to Brazil in the early fall of '97 a trip to which we were both invited ostensibly to give talks on education and democracy but more to tether us even more securely to this savvy organization devoted to rescuing and reclaiming Brazilian barefoot street children. Ever since we visited Brazil more specifically Salvador Bahia the year before Frank had been a man cast by a spell. It was as if he had bumped into his other self or wished for self or to become self the next place he could join without history a place to devour and imbibe to satisfy a desperate craving. He was a man possessed. From the moment he placed his feet on Brazilian soil he had on his dancing shoes. His penis

surged wild and tyrannical. He had found his place his new place. I remember looking on while he circled women in a huge dancing mass a mad man set loose. I had seen this stray before but never with such intensity ferocity. He was gone. He was determined. The undertow of the lust the sensuousness the gyrating bodies this man like an imprinted migrating bird would find his way back.

He reread Bataille as he imagined himself soaking in the deep sensuality of rebellious Tropicalia Brazil. He was pushing to be born again. This I had by now learned happened often with him. Pushing a wild errant weed out of the ground in strange places never fully fitting in never the right soil or the old soil or the trading in traipsed in soil new beginnings for him were revelations were manipulations his hunger and his wiliness out distanced even the best of us. He was a travelling salesman selling snake oil shedding snakeskin's reading tealeaves with a promise of a real heterosexual encounter. He boasted his love of women he was his own publicist a seduction a promise, an Italian boy from the Bronx who had a Ph.D. from Columbia University and wrote about Foucault and who as in Hermann Hesse in *The Bead Game* carried his intellectual credentials in his rustic mountaineering backpack his Georges Bataille and Henry Miller those were his basal readers. Who could resist? Not I. I turned the cheek at his small transgressions his small wayward cheats that were not fully consummated, *I was faithful for seventeen years!* He would later claim. You were faithful for none of them. The actual act isn't all there is to faithlessness I have learned.

Aftermaths: somehow I managed to look away I too had fallen prey and believed I had picked *a good man* as he told me he was. So here I am 63 not working bolstering and encouraging my/our fifteen year old to go about life normally *even if your colon is completely missing and you sport an ostomy bag*. There is no love in my life and little or no chance for one. I live on a plain of no expectation. Finally I guess I have achieved perfect symmetry with myself. I live exactly precisely in the moment sometimes value it more and more acutely and sometimes I am distracted and remote. I don't expect the next moment or next footstep. I chomp half aspirins as if they are *tic tacs*. Fugal undercurrent please, again please I just don't want a messy death.

Looking back over these words how resigned and abject I sound. But it is really more sad and more self-aware and a little self-mocking. Perhaps I have achieved a great success. She my mother beat me in uteri and I have lived 63 years to tell the tale staring down suicide because I longed for it but couldn't plunge in the knife. I eliminated the option of self-annihilation with a desire far bigger than my rage. *Avenging angel* lifted me beyond revenge leapfrogging over more generations of defeat and harm. Altitudes higher choose to be a mother *a good mother* to three children. I wanted to get that right and I believe and from what I have gathered in brief testimony I mostly did.

Whenever I sensed danger drawn a fly to a citronella candelabra venomous incipient leeched back mother claw I clutched returned daughter supplicant. Girl with mother her heart seizing when the mother beat herself archival primitive rhythmic mouth filled sea wash lying at my feet prostrate eyes pleading. Still finding myself near one of these millipede narcissists I take it and take it and take it. Penultimate passive aggressive

Mona Lisa smile penetrates seduces Miami sunbathing sunshine and then raptor lash crush slamming torrential the present against a past waiting cautiously for a moment of greatest fearsome retribution. Something erupted voices madness overtaking supple agreeable and then snapdragon belladonna bloodroot flowering. Mad maze reconfigures confused in reality never go beyond my own feeble enfolding doubt. I hearken back to an old refrain *I am just not womanly enough not worthy*. I watch lovers in the park while I walk our large rescued chocolate lab and see the comfort and unselfconsciousness they share the heat and I find it all but unbearable. At sixty-three, I look back to moment upon moment of emotional disarray I no more than a rat in a Bruce Nauman maze tympani driving riveting circles to nowhere. Living now pitched toward no more moments not again quickened heartbeats breathless Jean-Paul Belmondo Marlon Brando never to come toward me not again the man of dreams vanquished disappeared kicked out by lifelong embedded fear. The dog and I walk slowly in our majestic arbor of Central Park trees.

Husband number two: he was a man hell bent on getting back to Brazil. Braying at an ajar closet door flooded with the feelings therapy unleashed wringing hands and hankies for me to let him go and for me then to let him come home. An irresistible urge he like a migrating bird would inevitably follow with no consequences just the melodrama of an Italian operatic aria in tinsel plaintive tones a railing tenor. His narcissism filtered through his new religion psychotherapy somehow legitimizing the request. I a mock up of statuary tolerance sad brown eyes peering into the unlit closet to say nothing which is the sound of being tacit and compliant as I watched myself through the entrenched habits of the intense need to appease a hunger for abandonment yet one more time. In the end if nothing else I was consistent letting him go I again choosing a fitting denouement. The trauma of my past licks a salt stick to meadow-grazing animals. Fierce intractable logic embellishes my psyche, oppressed victim never appeased or released the teeth of the past without an antidote form a virtual lockjaw. I watched him go ticket in hand practically tumbling down the five flights of stairs from our elegant Bronx walk-up. He the son of an indulgent brain sizzled emotion stunted Italian mother electric-shocked out of wifely jealous rage for a philandering husband. The thick serum of denial of her husband's unfaithfulness *he puts the money on the table each Friday* they would tell me an emotional cripple who wrote more than forty years ago *attracted more to abandonment than love*. And it is into this marriage this family that we brought a found son?

Attracted More to Abandonment Than Love

*What I want to see
Is how far I can push him
Before he leaves
How much I can get away with
And have him stay
Attracted more to abandonment than love
I have him read
Psalms of promises responsively
I give him sins
For me to forgive
I stay celibate
Until the beads are sanctified
Novenas spoken
I provide*

*Each deed committed to memory
Carefully aged resentments
I use with care
The moment comes they're there
I beg separateness
Needing his hand to hold each stop
Living here at exists
Confined to life at the door
Groomed at the beginning
To fashion the end
Communing with rejection
I never swallow the bread.*

NB

Brazilians have this inordinate attraction for anything American and he, my husband, toppled head over for the *Tropicalia* lip-synched seduction and for the girl dipped in sensuality like a chocolate dunked cherry he with book by Piaget and she with acrylic paint drenched brush in the other. His identity hand-hewed a mesmerizing concoction of Henry Miller, Bataille and de Sade. Did *I feel the earth move under my feet feel the sky tumbling down feel my heart start to trembling* (Carole King) when he first ravished her in the course of the three or four days following the thin shavings of his talk on *Dewey and Discourse*? Sustaining a soprano's *High C* I share that she in an infamous e-mail claimed and copied to all of the vanguard of this Brazilian project notable for reclaiming and salvaging street-children theirs a pedagogy fortuitously named *The Pedagogy of Desire* sharing that she had had a series of riveting indigenous *black caiman* tale thrashing orgasms occupy her body when coupling with him, my husband, and all that in Portuguese. The contents of that encyclical handed me with translation over doubles and triples of *Jameson Irish Whiskey* ice cubes splashed with our multiple cultures. This economen delivered in my kitchen by our Brazilian houseguest a founding father of the *Pedagogy of Desire* aware of the boom effect of the infamous and extravagantly hurtful e-mail. Of life's colliding chance moments are we the architects or do they just happen to us? *Tevye** fist thrusting bombast sodden mournful wistful tourniquet twisting humor Jew gone awry and occasional indulgent navel gazing keep me more than five years later awestruck. (**Fiddler on the Roof*)



Caiman crossing a road [Brazil](#)



Fiddler on the Roof, Marc Chagall

On the Way to Marriage Vows-A Reprise

Because Frank had been christened we were able to get married by an Episcopal Priest in the socially conscious Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The wedding ceremony April 16th, 1988 was singularly traditional. In every version of the wedding ceremony Christ was front and center. Having asked the priest in deference to my mother and assorted Jewish relatives if we could have a service without mentioning Christ and having had him blanche he showed us our two choices. We selected the text that mentioned Christ two fewer times only ten instead of twelve. The engaging and tradition governed priest asked us as is necessary and customary to write some pre-nuptial essays about why we wanted to be married. Not only were my daughter and son not invited to the wedding they were never mentioned in my essays. Omens like demons befell this union before a word was spoken. **The end is in the beginning* my being dumped ten years hence was in the tealeaves. I vacated the marriage before even the vows were given awash in self-deceit standing beneath the prism of the rose window while my father played Bach on his fiddle. I took my urgent life and caste it aside becoming a bunch of needs and nerve endings a beggar starved of love supplicant to a man who climbed me like a thorny vine a man on the make raw ambition and I a flop doll on the feet of a dancing man. These an apt telling of the disingenuous mad fools behind these vows. (**"The end is in the beginning and yet you go on."* Samuel Beckett and *"The end –of a thing- is in the beginning and its beginning is in its end."* Kabala or Kosher Torah)

Exact texts of essays written as required preparing for our wedding:

December 20th, 1987

Dear Father L.,

It was important for both of us to meet with you. You clarified for us what it was we were involving ourselves in by getting married.

We have included paragraphs written independently about our former marriages and about why we feel we would like to marry each other.

We are of course open to further discussion, should you feel it necessary.

Included also are copies of our New York State Divorce Decrees.

Should we be given permission to be married at the Cathedral, we would like to have you marry us.

Again, thank you for sharing your thoughts with us.

Truly,
N.B. and F.P.

Dear Father L.,

We were two very immature individuals who got married when we were twenty-two and twenty-three after a whirlwind three week courtship, and tried to build a life on this uninformed immaturity. Upsetting issues and differences were not communicated and discussed adequately. Ultimately, an unbreachable distance existed and neither of us could find or had the will or the wherewithal to repair it. Two children were hurt by this marriage begun in an impetuous and unthought out manner. The marriage was dissolved because the home ultimately became filled with unwholesome expressions of anger and a silence, which was rooted in dishonesty.

NWB
12/20/87

Dear Father L.,

I believe that my marriage to Frank will be a lasting one because we have known each other as a couple for approximately seven years; and before that we were professional friends; and because we have a common sense of values and a shared world view; and because we look toward a future in which both our interests, needs and dreams have been considered; because we want to share the experience of raising a child and plan to adopt a child; because we can talk openly and discuss anything; because after disagreements our relationship deepens; because we both want it to work; and most importantly because we care deeply and love each other.

NWB
12/20/87

Dear Father L.

I first remember seeing my ex-wife when I was a fourth or fifth grade student. She was one year behind me. Quite literally, we grew up together having dated steadily during our high school and undergraduate years. There was reluctance on my part when we were engaged for the first time. My proposal to live together first was rejected, and having achieved a limited degree of self-sufficiency, (I began working as a teacher) decided to travel with friends through Europe for the summer only to return and set the date. In retrospect, I believe it was a lack of thoughtfulness, a weakness of character, my immaturity, a boyish naivete, and the fear of disappointing our respective families (both of us were the eldest child) that led to my decision to re-establish my engagement and subsequently marry. We were primarily, essentially good friends to one another, partners in a self-improvement enterprise. I relied upon my mate to assist me in exploring who I was and who I might become. I had many questions and many doubts about myself provoked and fueled by a strong will to find and allay my fears. I was self-serving and self-centered. My ethnic, traditional working class background came up against the cultural consciousness of the sixties and early seventies. There were no children. We provided no room for that to occur. Then, I could not see marriage as a place where love grows and trust builds between two adults that choose to join together. Marriage was merely a form – legal one at that.

FCP
12/20/87

Dear Father L.

My decision to wed Naomi comes many years after the decision of a rather innocent, immature young man just beginning adulthood. I have lived alone, established a career, even have gone back to school to study what speaks to a part of me that lay dormant for many years. I knew and appreciated Naomi first through the kinds of work projects she took on. I admired her commitment to try to find solutions to the almost insoluble problems in the urban, social arena. She involved herself in projects that addressed creatively and in a loving way the decay and violence that one cannot avoid seeing in our inner city, impoverished ghettos. I shared her concerns. We collaborated on projects of mutual interest. Our love interest in each other came after a very painful separation from my ex-wife and another love. For several years we have lived together. I see more parts of myself –my frailties, strengths, particular needs. I feel I have prepared for marriage as a communion.

FCP
12/20/87

Missive given me nine years letter:

Christmas Eve, 1997

Dear Naomi,

I took an action – really a series of actions- and provoked a crisis. My need to feel and be connected is, I now believe, a yearning to love more fully, more maturely than in the past. Our marriage, we both know, was not working. We both felt and knew this. It was not reaching toward fullness and maturity. We lapsed into transacting business, coping, and assuming roles – limited and limiting roles –, which kept increasing the distance between us. I truly believe I am not completely responsible for this crisis but it was I who took an action, which I know, was hurtful but it was also an authentic response to a deep need, a need you also must have. I am writing to make sense, to reach some clarity, to relieve the turbulence I carry with me. You carry around the image of being publicly betrayed and use it to anchor you in your present mode of relating to me. Castigating my father, brother, good father and, of course, me, you appear so strong in your position, so resolved that your course is the course, all the time pausing only momentarily to reveal your part, your role and your responsibility for who we are as a couple. On a deep level, I never thought you would not be there for me, never. I believed you would or could understand and give me time and space. I am thinking that you, too, needed and need some time and space. My actions are causing both of us anguish. Both of us. Can't you see this?

The idea of asking your permission to go to Brazil makes me ashamed and maintains you a mother and me as child. But – and I am being brutally honest with you – I was/am looking for some recognition of understanding from you, some indication that this trip will not be the final nail in the coffin of our relationship. Is this crazy to think and say this? If so, perhaps I am crazy. There is a strong sense of urgency in me that you respond. I need your response. Please.

Frank

Attached was the address of Monique D. in Sao Paulo Brazil, replete with phone and fax number and airline departure and arrival flights and times. They are as follows:

American Airlines
December 29th, 1997

NY-Sao Paulo: 9:50 p.m.
Flight # 951

January 13th, 1998

Sao Paulo-NY: 6:19 a.m.
Flight # 950

December 31st, 1997 I parked Luca with our Brazilian houseguest who in anticipation of New Year's Eve was entertaining his Brazilian co-workers and friends at the Sherry Netherland Hotel. Continuing on in the most brutal brass-knuckle kind of New York weather to Millburn, New Jersey where I gathered my fragile father up in a thick blanket and drew him into a waiting car with a driver. My brother in from Texas held my mother at bay as we walked out. I felt the quiver that ominous heart beat one experiences when stepping into a landscape of no return. Embarking on the unfamiliar cutting new ground skipping orbits defying expectation-severing bonds with common practice stepping into the unsafe.

Our father, eighty-three, had great gaps of memory known gingerly as age-related dementia. He had been ham hocked into the fixedness of a rapidly and rabidly advancing case of Alzheimer's by his wife of nearly sixty years who used the diagnosis to justify a cruelty unimaginable and life threatening. Bluma, as he called her, *wants me dead, how sad, how sad*, he wrote on the calendar on his desk right before he was taken from his much loved home. I led our father of gentle soul and faulty steps into the waiting car to leave his home forever and live out the rest of his life in the home of a friend where he died on what would have been Frank and my tenth anniversary April 16th, 1988. December 31st as Frank was getting his sea legs for Brazil. I sat in a car holding my father's hand as he informed me *Naomi, the end is near*.

In my bag a copy of the following letter of reckoning:

May 28th, 1994

To my dear children and my dear Dr. Winslow,

Tragically I have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. From the film I I viewed which the Winslow's brought over on this disease and the section on Alzheimer's Disease which Bluma and I read together in Sherwin Nuland's book "How We Die," I realize now that the disease is progressive and leads to the complete death of the brain.

It is therefore incumbent upon me to make clear that I cannot subject my dearest children and wife to that horror. I do not wish to spend my final days or years in a

nursing home. I want to be remembered as the father and husband I was, and not as a vegetative, uncomprehending, no longer human person.

Please respect and understand that I will need your help, so that I can be spared a Nursing Home existence.

Making this decision is difficult at this time. However I realize that while I still understand my fate, I must plan to do whatever is necessary to spare my children and my wife great suffering. Nor do I want to jeopardize the modest inheritance that is their rightful due.

The literature on Alzheimer's is replete with statements from patients' families saying "that if the patient knew what was ahead for him or her he would have preferred to die."

I ask therefore for forgiveness in preferring death to the bleakness and pain and emotional cost to all, were I to end my days in a Nursing Home.

I love you all,

Dad

This is a day of colliding worlds driving with a reluctant father to a final destination a husband finding consolation in the arms of his Brazilian lover having had the unbelievable fucking chutzpah to walk out and our son Luca at the Sherry Netherland with our Brazilian houseguest and a large contingent of partying Brazilians. Confronting the immutable facts that our mother had tried to kill our father a troubling designation listed in the *Elder Abuse Registry in New Jersey*. Enigmatic in itself that I had this man as a husband nevertheless having him leave the Northern Hemisphere to join his lover at the tip of the Southern Hemisphere. Justification and reckoning to our son taken from the soil of tyrannical Paraguay to give a better life to. *How could you betray me in this way when you adopted me?* Luca said to his father as he held tight to his luggage and left the apartment for the airport only short days earlier.

On April 16, 1998 our father died of his own volition just stopped eating loving goodbyes to my brother and his family and to me and my kids more directly while in residence with the friend who had taken him in. These many years later I grieve *time does not heal all wounds* the where is he exactly lingers a stalled question mark. Needless to say I left Frank. I stayed resolved. The marriage was terminated. The apartment sold. Frank went into therapy. And we tried to find our way to the almost stock-in-trade realities of child visitation custody issues and divorce. I can say unequivocally that the hurt never goes away or diminishes. There is something that happens to a woman when her man no matter how bad or faulty the marriage is walked out on for another woman. There is a place within that keeps bleeding and bleeding the passing of time is no coagulant.

Preamble to desolation and desperation and so the tale begins and reverberates:

I wanted to be able to tell you that we all lived happily ever after. And that my worst fear any woman's worst fear that she will be dumped abandoned walked out on when she is over fifty or fifty-five when menopause and night sweats are distant memories when the body settles into its wrinkles and decline wanting only to hold on to a hand that reassures that no matter what the mirror says you are not the girl you left behind but *my girl, my girl*. Well not too hard to guess in a flagrant manner that belied his laid-back ways with a flamboyance of a profligate thumbing doctrine and canon trifling with the promise of a good Catholic altar boy. With the braggadocio and invincibility of a teenager or the foolhardiness of an animal believing it is camouflaged standing sucking nectar from dangling buds by a frequented roadside he trounced our lives rubbing our faces in the grassy down of her womanliness and feminine wiles.

Where his father had ducked the head of his mistress into the gear box of the front seat of his car upon sighting his advancing barely ten-year-old son, my husband, who was haunted by the image of this *Medusa* head being shoved out of sight he like a man with a show dog a trophy mistress ran her around the rink of our lives leading us to think that she was a colleague a fellow educator a Piaget expert from Sao Paulo, Brazil. It is said that unless one faces down the dragon takes on the rapacious and repugnant purges oneself of the hideous of the undrained contemptible of that which overflows and contaminates present life with the effluence and stench of a forgotten *Portosan* we are doomed destined to retread a facsimile re-enact the deplorable. The inevitable splatter, the unresolved gobs of his past fell on us like heaving pilaster as we entered a friend's Upper West Side apartment, invited guests, as he and she were, to a traditional peasant Brazilian meal. At the threshold, we became the stage for this mythic rendering of his, my husband's, *worst nightmare* that of being revealed.

After Luca's soccer game we were to reconvene at our Brazilian friends, journalist and family, for a festive *fejoado* (Brazilian national dish) to celebrate the arrival of their friend who my husband obligingly picked up from the airport and, of course, before the blur of her sighting focused we instantly knew there was an enemy in our midst. As she rose to embrace us two kisses he watched her gazing at her with the slobbering fascination the deep kind of belching satisfaction one has after a good meal anticipating our responsiveness as we met this luminary and new friend of his from Brazil. We were never to know that he sliced her insides with his thrusting hot manliness even to moments before our much-touted introduction. He had culled our delight at meeting her and equally our very wonderfulness as individuals in our own right. He had imagined our embracing this stranger delighting as he did in her frothy beingness. He was introducing his trophy family to his trophy mistress getting us wrapped in the gooey web of his benumbed detached, as in retina, pitiful bit of self-aggrandizement. We were to live in his mind as attachments appendages of his love affair. We were to enrich and anchor his position with her. We were the vitamin supplements for his love brew. She was to come to us as if to the ghost of *Absalom Absalom!* (*William Faulkner*)

The nearly unbearable the quiet word honor trifled beyond the recognizable. Creating new meaning something moral and good out of the morass into which we found ourselves dredging up the words deriving vocabulary to capture this moment is to disappear into *Beckett* silence spare of words eking out the resilience before the why can be found being mute and dumb-founded the laurel wreath of our ultimate salvation. Standing in the swirl of handshakes and kisses an unbridled rage steamed through me a torment that could find no solace in revenge. Pain blistered forth in images of hacked bodies. In years to follow submitting to a sudden spring-like breeze at the edge of the Harlem Meer in Central Park greeting the heron the egret and the cormorant, our son and I would be soothed believing magically those birds needed our presence there. Then we quickly had to step out of the glare his blinding passion and go beyond the choke and disbelief the betrayal of a certain rock bottom trust the premise upon which one goes about taking for granted that mornings and periwinkle morning glories will come on summer days even when one is not there to witness. Barreling toward us avalanching fate more feared than anticipated as truly ever entwining one's own life. Next moments eclipsed suddenly the predatory exists where one saw the predictable. *The earth did move under our* feet* fate that which cannot be fully anticipated or controlled was upon us like a wild dog. (*Carole King)

His unstinting rapturous sure-footed gaze at her struck me never captivated so by me in the seventeen years I had known him intimately. It is that hard look that women sacrifice last names for it is that unequivocal steady stare which defies gravity and time and from which love struck verse erupts. Extracted from Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater*, that demeanor in men who have felt a pleasure in their loins when their hot throbbing member does not question its stiffening when minds go blank and fantasies are sated that still have not surfaced and are fleeting when piecing together dreams when obsession rules out impotence when a man can sink back into the derivative and eternal when sex becomes life and life is nowhere to be seen outside the hot hidden moment when kingdoms are forsaken. A woman longs for this swooping up this beyond the imagined this yet to be named star. Women rarely have the confidence or the wherewithal to forsake reason and dive cormorants into the deep water to subdue a hunger in fleeting seconds moments like these. Women deep in their fecundity know at the end of the rainbow are the babies who like anchors or counterfoils mock creature urgings.

This man who said whenever queried *do you love me* would respond *I don't know what that means* summarily reducing the question of my heart to the preposterous and trifling. This man to whom I was wed and with whom I shared a child if not biological was stolen into the rapturous and unthinking into a world from which we were excluded we were on-lookers salve for her curiosity the hidden bones of his stories dug up for their murmured conversation in the aftermath of tightly wrapped love. This man who never tried to bring me into this frothy celestial state except to castigate me for not bringing him there was now a lovesick pup a retrieving dog bringing home a possum for us to gaze at muttering reluctantly *good dog*. This man brought into his wild deep beyond somehow magically envisioned merging all his of us all of his worlds into one plump ball of yarn. She apparently had been convinced or had written or co-authored the script in which we would embrace her as our own. We were to be delighting in his pleasure and happiness without being privy fully knowledgeable about the extent of this tryst. She was to be the

yeast the new ingredient rising into the everydayness of our life. Before this desultory plot was fully revealed we found ourselves standing in this little pool of droppings too blatant too glaring too unbearable to grasp.

Ten-year-old boys have imagined what they still do not quite believe really exists passion intimacy forbidden dewy fragrances that reside in the wild beyond the unfathomable deep the place upon which reason precariously rests teasing taunting as it surfaces secretive and hard to push aside it rides the body hard as it lumps out and feathers with advancing age. Breaking the convention of myth and respectful cheating invading the innocence of burgeoning bludgeoning with the volume of their sex still loud with pants and precipitation its smell the blush the heat the moist eyes damp in the afterglow of such passion. Our ten-year-old son and I braced to contend with the danger we had barely imagined that now lurked. Life changed with the first scent of their USA based intimacy. We stood riveted like deer fastened to high beams trying to trick our minds out of seeing what was before our eyes the sanctuary of their hot restless bed of love.

Who wants to move through the night air with an irrevocable truth that will change inextricably everything that exists beyond? Who wants to wake to the knowledge of such deep betrayal to a humiliation that makes the mirror a forbidden object? Who has felt a heart flip like a fish out of water gasping but without the stamina capacity or instinct to get back in? We were the strangers in the midst of a new element probing what was outside of us for a way to exist.

But I am jumping ahead of myself going right for the rupture the denouement. There must be reasons common female folklore dictates. *No man just does anything like that without reasons* you know reasons meaning not enough supplicants not enough scissor spreads of legs and limbs not enough bare-assed bottoms up or home baked breads back rubs alluring perfumes and reckless wanderings of mouth and tongue. There must be reasons his mother positioned a strident counterattack as the pellets of his indiscretions were barely beating against us. *No man just does things like this* she intimated while with outstretched arms she was retrieving her wayward son with psalms of the unconditional and perpetual.

This very same woman a cultural icon who took prescription Librium going on thirty years and whose brain had to be shocked out of the numbness of not knowing what she in all probability knew not being able to or thinking she did not have the right or wherewithal to snip off the cultural stays. She waited martyr like silent sanctimonious tending her children her justification for taking and accepting anything life dealt her. Her husband finally finding his way home impotent and plagued by small strokes and other idiomatic somatic anomalies which she was called upon to nurse. She who castigated against me threw down the gauntlet the first stone as the gates closed around her beloved first son. I stood astonished at being so summarily exiled from the family bosom unless I colluded in the fabrications that were being carefully woven to shield her son from full view. Having the hubris to walk out walk away an outward manifestations of privilege to suffer the unsparing alone and solitary and out of the limelight. These were in the end a rough and tumble hard working blue-collar Italian family. Those wagons pulled around

fast and neat. Before details of this disruption fully hit me she was they're looming Amazonian thighs flanked tightened and impenetrable blaming me for the wounding for the disorder and disarray. Although her mother and her three children my husband included shooed the other women away while threatening their father of being thrown out caste aside yet no one ever spoke to this woman about her husband's flagrantly adulterous ways. No one ever really knew or said if she knew about the other women. Only the electric shocks and the endless supply of Librium and her steady monthly visits to the Bronx psychiatrist who spoke to her for the moments it took for him to write the refill for the prescription. His name was something like Dr. Squeamish and he too even if from the Bronx had a summerhouse in Truro, Cape Cod where psychiatrists and analysts line the beach like nesting turtles.

Combing the threads of the first ten years of our lives together I try to pull out the discontents. I try to peer through the looking glass to see anticipate the rupture. And clearly I see I was a very good wife. I was trained to be a good wife. I am of the generation of good wives. Like schools of fish we were promulgated to perform as if by instinct fixing homes raising kids muting and secreting careers as if dealing in illicit trade. We were soundless so as not to deafen or distract by any publicly acclaimed success. We were solicitous zealously accommodating good mothers good friends and good homemakers. If any group was explosive with a barely veiled vengefulness rattling even an Old Testament god it was my generation of the good girl wife. Peering into the vagrancy's of time I see I was relegated to and accepted being both his mother and manager efficient reliable omnipresent unconditional and unwithholding. Passion tamped down like an oozing wound the seat of distress pulsing for relief a hungry mouth tossing rivets through interior language thoughts and nights nerves hives migraines breakdowns binges restlessness beneath the apron and well-guarded smile turmoil and turbulence an irrevocable undertow. Each day hoping you would just stay contained and unrevealed. Dutiful well behaved shiny like a polished unbitten classically shaped delicious apple is what you got with a 50's bride. And that is precisely why he married me almost eight years advanced in age.

Never in my wildest thoughts never in my most flagrant fantasies of redemption for my scripted history of choices did I anticipate that he would show up an errant boy a brat shoving a wilted bouquet of flowers against my nose. A devious vengeance a rage boiled over from deep within him evidencing resentment that far transcended my life. I was not large enough to incite such disrespect such towering disregard such trifling with convention. This was a re-enactment of the subterranean. This was a trouncing of civility and a total absence a lack of feel for the generic etiquette of discretion. With this action he eclipsed decency and outflanked any misdeed or harm done to him. To add a touch of balance a good male friend said to me he didn't like the way my husband approached breaking up his marriage but then again he added philosophically, *men never seem to do this well. He wanted his cake and to eat it too*, mused another man we both knew.

Later when his transgressions were fully admitted to and disclosed he merely said at first even meekly that he felt over-shadowed by me that he was always standing in my shadow

always a little to the back of my right shoulder. I would say that from that position is where he shot his bold move showing up with a lover with whom he had unguarded unprotected sex in a country just about to burst out with plague-like levels of *AIDS*. I would say that however he got there he finally only came out in front with the secret bride of his bed inches away she a weapon of yet appraised dimensions. This was *chutzpah* taken to the nth degree. Still the words get garbled when trying to express how I felt as the entire premise of my life was turned upside down. Stunning that he felt sufficiently vainglorious to think that he could sneak in public and get away with it. That he believed that his wife and son were that accepting that oblique and numb. That he thought he was akin to *Mitterrand* who in death at his ceremonial burial was encircled by his promises and his betrayals his wife and mistress and progeny all juxtaposed beyond his life at peace or so the appearance with one another.

Grasping further for the threads of understanding as the ensuing events the thickly encrusted denial crumbled as the week of her first coming out revealed what became nearly slapstick I pored over my marriage of a decade like an archivist searching for missing or mislaid text. Although a hideous declamation I could see that leap frogging over class lines triangulates closer subtler distinctions. Discretion and subtlety are domains of an elevated class system where rules are understated inherited bred in. Where the egregious is used as fodder for positioning or legal grounds but never until the blast-off as blatant not until the court becomes the arena for the duel and usually fortunes or public reputations are at stake does the illicit or untoward become so alarmingly public. My numbness my insensitivity my selective auditory powers my inability to sense danger or want to reckon with the faults of an eventual cave in even fill me with awe. Like a *service dog* I was trained to accommodate take care of make life easier for and to do it quietly expecting nothing in return. Part of this is generational and part in the lining of a family history in which one partner remained mute and victimized almost gratefully almost Calvin postulate as if this would get one a *good works* award on the way to heaven.

In the beginning of our desultory courtship Sundays at around 3 PM he would flee on bandy chicken legs, which once missed and now revile me. The aesthetics of love are daunting as the paradigm shifts so too the turnstile of attraction invisible magnets change fields backward hindsight glances finds the inscrutable. Men of prowess with airs of confidence and strides of easiness their jackets flung along jaunty shoulders now turn my sight. Were they there before? No more Mediterranean boys who seem mostly normal and ordinary with plaintive voices feigning concern when it is lodged squarely in and of themselves. Time is a bandwidth with which I play. Cohesion does not wear well with matters of the heart. It gets resolved and pacified in bits and chunks as tolerance grows so the opening so the truth. When the aroma of pasta and gravy would fill his nostrils and his archetypal loins when the call of Mama would reverberate deep in the down of his privates he would run toward his ambivalence his ambidextrous ways to disconnect from me. This dust kicked up by his erratic quick and jerky disappearance did not disparage or dislodge me. This did not throttle my pursuit. The hope of settling myself into a place at the celestial Sunday table the allure of a family structure left undivided and undeterred by ocean crossings and generational backlash this the sanctuary my new land

of promise an endless string of solid untroubled Sundays. The upheaval of troubling assimilationist seas did not affect a dollop of their gravy seasonings. Place settings precise and predictable totally resistant to change set my mouth watering my heart hopeful and a determined if not manipulative patience for it to work. His scattering would ultimately lead him back to my doorstep. What I didn't anticipate that men who move on urges would also follow those same urges away from the harbor of my heart and need. Sundays were on loan and ultimately had I stood in the cold of my own isolation and uncharted day circumspect and patient the awful tumbling tumbleweed of my inner turbulence and fear seeking abatement at their Sunday table I would have been forced to rub a plan of my own into the thin skin of my intolerance.

When Luca joined us more formally as a family he declared that on Sundays we would dress up and parade with our six-month-old baby on the streets of the Upper West Side. As if his feet were still plugged to the old soil of the old country as if poised as a giant crosscurrent from Sicily to Naples a rare deep tenderness welled up in me as he proposed this plan. The Upper West Side being the quintessential bastion of assimilation no trappings of anything but sheer unadulterated intellectuality with a *shmear* of unkempt arrogance and a politics that leaned way left ran counter to Sundays ordained to recapture the old country the old ways. Although as of yet unaware I was on my way to building an arsenal of resentment too soon to spot even with advanced radiology resistance was the piling the sledge root of forty years of discontent little scurrying sea snags of denial got buffeted and deterred by jaws locked like prison gates fixed into the firmament into an impenetrable *good girl* smile.

I was knee deep in the firmament the foot faults of the current script to admit disquiet and unrest that doubts were already scurrying around inside like vagrantly multiplying hamsters. But I am seasoned enough to know that, that is where the color the texture the complexity the truths come from the anomalous. And anyway I had joined with him at least in part more than I'd like to admit to escape Sundays to fill my immaculate plate with layers of pasta al dente awash with Italian garlicky meat gravy to plug up a wilderness a solitariness of Sundays alone. And now short-circuiting into the present Sundays are like lumps of lard as in a *Joseph Beuys* and I must carve out my day over and over again. And on every other Sunday join shaping hands with Luca who is as in a classic New York divorce agreement mine two Sundays a month.

Luca in the early years as family became the all encompassing focus of our lives. Our talk our lovemaking our fights all logistics were always centered on Luca. The fact that Frank had said when first we became lovers that no matter what else *a couple's love had to be primary primal and central*. This alone wrapped me around him like a cocoon to a feathery tree branch. He had expunged this little bit of marriage rhetoric from A. and L., two older more settled friends in his former life. With A. and L.'s cautionary words banged into a gulping silence our life proceeded with great middle-class normalcy until Luca reached two-and-a-half years of age.

Our life together with child quickly revealed itself as neither a great love nor an exuberantly happy marriage. The poet in me wept reckoning. Mama and Papa Bear fell

into mundane routine scheduling Luca's life and needs predominating. I worked hard mothered diligently and consistently and tolerated more than occasional discursive looks at my deficient femininity my missing feminine wiles tethered to the irrevocable fact that I was and would be forever nearly eight years older. This all evidenced in a body whose age gave itself away on an increasingly lumpy jaw line and cheeks which would occasionally with great fatigue droop much like basset hound ears. I was constantly berated barraged disparaged because I was older as if that were a genetic disorder a birth defect and an unremitting hardship on his life. I was too naïve to know that passion begets passion wiles are stirred by the hot flagrant hands of love that bath salts and fragrances honey licked lips can bring to life even the most dormant wiles. Remembering the prepubescent here girl leafing through library index cards to find *feminine wiles* never found the written word the exegesis that would lead me to sensual serendipity.

Imagine, disparaged because of deeply submerged feminine wiles? I wandered in the depths of solitude in search of these, leagues deep, urges, or come-ons? I scoured fashion magazine ads of perfumes sprayed on as if out of a skunk's butt, a man draped seductively and supinely over a woman sniffing. Thong underwear, power bras, wielding, as if out of the reckless Wild West, lassoes, whips, cat-o-nine-tails? Acting frilly and weak and unable to resist seduction, as if sedated and think of embroidery and recipes while a hot rod is twirling and palpitating around inside? Questions, questions, asking, or not asking, for reciprocal pleasure, while moaning and baying as if life were about to expire as sandpaper tufts of a man's hairy chest brush up and down with the impatient and erratic strokes of a window washer up high and afraid of heights? You see I was quite lost. Was it to not say a truthful word about the performance having just been laid to bear? Was it climbing like an untamed cheetah onto a man and fastening wild, fiery darting glances, and jugular nips on a feigned reluctant neck, a prelude to possible engulfment and danger? Was it carnality that reached into the man's wallet while releasing a scent of transcendent weakness, and a need to depend, like a good concubine to a Shah? Was it feigning pleasure and delight, no matter the state of the throttling erection or the lack of its languoring within? Or was it, the game, part of the game? These were the things that neither my mother nor my first husband taught. For absent unignited feminine wiles, and for being born when I was and to whom I was, I was dumped.

*Bitterness and rage will not yield –it is, I find no way to forgive
–pathetic grasping unthinking slow deaths I chose, coward...*

Monique Monique

*Wild mouth
Did she give you ass?
Did she suck your neck out?
Did she give you hickeys?
Did she give you ass?
Answer yes or no
Petulant mouth
Obdurate pouty teenager
Tongue, a serpent's
Slipping in and out
Forked, yes forked*

*What wildness what tempers?
What furies drove me?
My own words lethal to me
When were they formed?
What decade kept me?
Held me hostage
Where I remained
A frieze against
Days years hours to come
How deep the hurt, the rage
The claws like tongues
Forking out words like heaping dung
What has become of me?
As my child lay dying
I acted saintly
The kindness deep in my veins
The strength, the capability to endure
Deep within me, the hymns and songs
From my righteous father's limbs
Righteous, his word,
And then the prickly, unbridled
Heinous profanity rushing
Bile from my mouth
Did she give you ass?
I the face in the mirror
The words from deep inside
I am guilty
Hatred rage hurt
The rant the cant mine
Defiling violating
A moon indifferent
Boomerang boom bang
I cannot harm the night
Stuck in time
The moon always moves on
NB*

Love that soft breath of new spring the erotic colors of sunrises and sunsets the words trembling on pages upon pages of poetry love that does not spring from plot and plan from discursive maps of ambition love the pestle and mortar of desire was not I was to discover the impetus for our union. Love I grasped was still as elusive to me as feminine wiles. The rock would just not go up that high before tumbling down no matter what the pushing. The fact that I was getting to like passion and sexuality never became relevant. I was a late bloomer but suddenly awake in me new sunrises new heights. Wow life brings fruits when one is ready. I just could never measure up or these elusive feminine wiles were the ruse the route out of Frank's mounting panic about maybe really getting close to Luca and to me. This assaultive keeping me at bay and regarding me with oblique looks of disdain were not just in the brush of his eye but with his very pointed tongue. Once in a while he would state as if just having had an epiphany that we should *treat each other kindly and then everything would be all right*. I was if not being sexy being kind. I was bred to be kind. Girls of the 50's were raised to be good and kind. Limp handshakes limp dicks fraught symbols pleas for kindness a ruse an excuse performance prohibitor the eerie presentiment of repulsion ambition at the nexus with fucking. I buried the burgeoning barreling feelings of discomfort and rejection like a dog

trying to savor and keep bones. I felt badly for him forced to drift into erotic fantasy for the occasional lovemaking guilty about being older grateful to have a husband who was such a *cute puppy* as my divorce lawyer would characterize him some eight years hence in the formal breach of trust Barber v. Pignatelli divorce lawsuit.

You didn't expect me to give up that kind of chance for passion? Mostly it doesn't even come along in a lifetime? Some years later after some years of psychotherapy he told me indignantly with that same familiar self-righteousness it was owed me. And then in a thundering revelatory therapeutic moment he discovered *I will share this most painful insight if you promise not to hurt me* he said. The juxtaposing of realities here is daunting. *I need family. I need to be part of a family. I need a family of my own.* This seismic chunk of insight collided with my reality. After all who had written an adoption memoir entitled *Needing Family No Matter What*. So we both needed families but not each other and not the family we built together. Other people's families are what he sought pursued joined like a reattached limb. I on the other hand needed unsolitary Sundays and unabashed unapologetic sex. Sex was generative better than a face-lift wildly abandoning fucking the tonic the secret for keeping young maintaining youthfulness. This marriage was a collision course of faulty expectation of untethered unformulated reconstituted desire. The family we built around a son of Paraguay was a sham a *house of cards* a place of misguided refracted solipsistic lazy fault riddled dreams.

Frankly Speaking of Snake Oil

*I walked or drooped or sauntered
Or dropped into Dante's hell
I gave my body to the devil
Watch over me while I sleep
Fuck me until my face is rosy and firm
My body succulent
Like newly born summer fruit*

*Shed him years later
Am seventy now
Still now that my face
Relaxes into its age
I bled out my life
For a faulty promise
I sold my soul for sex
That it would be the tonic
To keep one young*

Moral: Don't read woman's magazines in supermarket lines

Naomi Barber

Although legally and fully Luca's mother from the day our plane landed in Paraguay and a legal swearing in of fidelity to parenting and family life we found we were unable to leave due to inscrutable Paraguayan politics. Moved to our lawyer's house until the legal process could be disentangled Frank, claiming urgency about his work needs scuttled immediately home. Never to discuss that he remain behind with Luca I being the primary

breadwinner by half. Not surprising after being held practically captive in Paraguay wondering if our wily lawyer would be able to grease enough palms to free us Luca and me. Then climbing aboard a plane to leave Paraguay wondering if we could survive being separated severed cut-off from our lawyer upon whom we had become fully mindlessly dependent. When we landed in Miami at the door of immigration we fully expected to heave our luggage and ourselves into Frank's hands yielding up any sense of responsibility and our greater going forward destiny. He not only never came to Miami to pick us up he never even thought of it. And so there we were struggling with luggage and customs and an overnight stay in an airport motel my five-month-old and I. In New York we were greeted by this man who longed for a son whom Luca would call father and our openly gay neighbor who dubbed himself grandpa who came with a shopping bag of infant size sports outfits representing each New York team from Century 21. Our lives in New York began this way. Having found or re-found myself in Paraguay whole intact raw with poetry and insight we walked back into the bubble of plastic I had constructed as a life. The full story of Luca's adoption is told in *Needing Family No Matter What*.

Once home we settled quickly into a life poured into a jello mold a sculptural archetype waiting for the molten lead or bronze to settle in. It was a caricatured version of family with feet sunk in the alabaster soil of Sicily and Naples. Reconfigured self-invention he a Jewish intellectual a *survivor* and an Italian intransigent an arc of Italian vineyards shading. Rapine divine ravishing a sixties kind of guy dissolute debased the swagger gone I cringed with humiliation the vacated promise of primrose fulsome ecstatic love. This pure brood blue-collar *goyishe* guy this *Zelig* a polished interloper a *poseur a cipher* a designation offered by my big son the sheer reality of this contender settled an oozing wound. This guy who rested the pitons of his ambitions against my back and deep into my spine this trans-cultural hopscotcher this climber would say *You're a step up, Sheila,* as he would call me lacing it with *I'm on the way up you are on the way down.*"

I'm jumping around this narrative like a hyper kinetic kangaroo. It starts in fits pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that keeps re-arranging itself in my mind as I grow sturdier and am able to peer into the past with greater clarity if with greater pain. Distance just makes it uglier and less palatable. Squandering a life on whim and fantasy barricaded from my past by stacked sandbags of my own making. I walled myself off from an unwieldy past lingering hungers I refused to name or contemplate landed wrongly in my middle years. Too late to retrieve or relive remorse laughable when holder of a senior metro card regret best when time yields to reimagining redoing reinventing.

Rage and heartbreak unwilling to follow him headlong into traffic or to rush off the back of the bus toppling upon him distractedly his taunts to test my fealty life on the edge proxies in the conditional never *'til death do us part* taunting bating foisting a tangle of obstacles to see how far I would go to demonstrate my love follow him to what limits what the demarcation *Maginot* line. Devilish this subjugation not fully knowing yet that in his fibrous lining was hatred and anger limned by a chip on his shoulder. Abject irony plunged again into fearfulness yet again with a wild avenging wounded animal out to get

his own as if riding the surfeit of my wave would get him the golden nugget of his amorphous crazed ambition. Never understanding that soap and fragrances were the linchpins to fasten him hook him soothe him make him forget it was me a requisite balm to soothe becalm his frenzied misery. Over sixty I begin to understand why French women used a bidet. Rage and heartbreak oceans of emotions break over my lips *I want to die I want to die* the din of a hum as I stand by the sink washing dishes. I want to remove myself from the rage humiliation and heartbreak. Feeling foolish vulnerable and exposed. Living in deep secrecy with my abundant sexuality never in tune with its rhythms and urges wanting to be a beautiful woman desired wanting most to be normal I toppled into his waiting suggestive arms thinking I had hit nirvana finding I landed in true hell.

He was waiting for his Jew for his Jewish intellectual woman and a resident of the Upper West Side. I fit the template. I could bring him across his own *River Ganges*. Like fruits of Bacchus delirious I could bring retribution apply salve to the wound scars from the ulcerated allergies flung across his body like sludge as he attended City College. He travelling the distance from his insular Bronx Italian walled bit of the City to a College where Jewish furies unfurled themselves indiscriminately blatantly often brutally. Finally, having a home among the disheveled swagger pacing sidewalks among the openly bombastic, smug and pompous. Arrogant and flaunting the mannered hyperbole of the Jew the Jewish intellectual Jew the *Talmudic* once removed Jew moving from sacred text to the sacrilege of non-denominational philosophic tracts. Reading German's and maybe even worse in the pursuit of truth flagrant incursions into the despicable noses stuffed in the scripture or other religious tracts while shaking back and forth rocking with rhythms of sex. It all twists and turns and combines and I the little girl still the woman late to be formed got caught up in the web of this desire for retribution handmaiden for the hostile takeover and makeover of a very provincial small time Italian mean-spirited guy. His one attribute is he could fuck women and talk about it better than he did it. Cute heterosexual on the loose with Ph.D. fetish to feverish strolls up Broadway among the ranks of lambskin sheathed academics to sip espresso at the Hungarian Pastry Shop. This little Italian Catholic schooled boy waited curled into an invisible knot a snake wound tight ready to lash and catch a prey waiting to eat mythically from the forbidden fruit of the Jewish intellectual to take inside to absorb. I was the mortal food. I was the awaited prey. And I practically dashed into his forked tongued mouth. And on an early outing a first field trip I took him to the Hungarian Pastry Shop and it was there that I sensed the heat the voracity of his ambition.

We're drifting way back to the summer of 2001 no longer regarding Brazil as a threat. *I'm sleeping at Gail's tonight!* He told us when he called. Gail was the replacement of the Brazilian, Monique. Gail. Gail. Like a gale wind she now took over our lives and our imaginations and pummeled our hurt and pain back into life. We could mother and son revisits our all too real fears of abandonment. Here again to grasp the climbing strangulating vine of pain the fear of oblivion of being left behind the jilt already punched in its wattage of jolt. We were again playing second fiddle to his father's enriched, as in pasta and white bread, sex life. This time he snagged another Jew a real Jew a younger Jew a woman probably south of forty with a thirteen year old boy who went to the school

of limousine liberal Jews the school that bespoke social justice and had the word ethical in its very name. And this wunderkind passed the test and got into the most competitive exclusive high school in New York City which he will enter in the early fall. Our son for whom school was an every day challenge had to contend with this *new brother*. This boy with whom my son would share a room on *visitations* this anthropomorphized god this totem of the perfect Bar Mitzvah a boy I was suppose to deliver to his avaricious father whether by adoption or biology. Heartbreak and pain *you never gave me enough classical music* never the musician the cello by then leaning against a wall you never gave me enough cultural food or clues and you failed as a woman but now I'm able to get real up close to a real off-spring of the real Upper West Side. *I'm sleeping at Gail's tonight* if only he could truly fuck his brains out!

This Gail lives in the hundreds on the West Side skirting the Hudson and bordered by Upper Broadway. This Gail is the real thing. She lives in a co-op a classic six or better with a full-time doorman left her by her ex-husband with whom she has dinner and with his new wife. They gather in the matrimonial home part of his settlement his escape clause all so civilized *and he sees his son a little more than I do. I'm sleeping at Gail's house*. The house and bedroom vacated and left her by that husband and now our guy is also a beneficiary of his guilt-ridden fleeing largesse. *Daddy's going to have sex with Gail tonight* our awakening newly thirteen-year-old son says. More of his brain and heart and mine overtaken by grief rage and pain. *He's a fucking exhibitionist* my daughter says a show-off an unscrupulous tantalizer. He bagged the prize he bragged *never any more girl friends from below West 96th Street*. How much damage one little guy can do we had to move beyond make him into a fleck a nobody a blood sucking fiend filling our minds with his sexual exploits. He was no good. We had to step away from the trauma we felt each time he called culling up the memory of the night he blew into town at the *Feijoada* the Brazilian peasant feast with Monique. As we chipped our teeth and burnt our tongues aghast at his *chutzpah* the levels of his deceit, shocked, stunned and still it surfaces like a contaminant, like sludge. We had to purge ourselves of his ability to stun us and make us recoil without getting hidden and hardened. Gail's house is the forbidden place into which we must enter and demythologize. His penis is unrelenting in its ambitions and pursuits. Our fear of its temptations had us shackled. Caring for us so little minimizing us so our rage and heartbreak needed to be turned into a nourishing energy. One morning it would no longer matter. One morning we would wake up and find the sun truly golden with possibility. The phone would ring and we would no longer be curious or connected to his current sexual tender its lodgings or its exploits.

Riverdale Diaries and Days in the Life of...

1988 - 1990

I wanted so badly to tell you we all lived happily every after. And that my worst

fear any woman's worst fear that she will be dumped abandoned walked out on when she is over fifty or fifty-five when menopause and night-sweats are distant memories when the body settles into its wrinkles and decline wanting only to hold onto a hand that reassures that no matter what the mirror says you are not lost the girl you left behind but *my girl my girl*. In 1998 jumping ahead but predictable goddamned predictable – my prince brought another found person home a woman from Brazil – she sprawled on our couch like an odalisque. He lifted her off and took her by the hand and left down sixty-three stairs away from us. She tucked by his side his obsession to be in love with a Latina but one who spoke Portuguese and had advanced degrees and if that wasn't enough had feminine wiles with a vengeance and could paint. I looked out the window as he drove off in our car Luca now nine saying only *I told you that she was Daddy's girlfriend*.

But let's go back to the beginning of this sordid and absurdly predictable story almost until we get to 1993. In 1993 Luca was stricken with a catastrophic illness ulcerative colitis. In 1993 Luca was the eighth ranked tennis player for boys sixteen in the tri-state area when he was just thirteen. At fourteen Luca lost his colon yes his entire colon and we resided in intensive care for nearly a month. By then we were back in Manhattan dear sweet thank god Manhattan in separate homes his father and I connected by the Number 4 cross-town bus and a divorce decree in which my adulterous ex-husband paid a lawyer handsomely so that the word adulterer would not appear rather it was *irreconcilable differences* that drove us apart. In the end you are disrobed by gestures like this. How much more respect would I have had if he had claimed the word adulterer as a descriptor for his actions. What follows *the end being in the beginning* when Luca was a little more than one we moved left the hallowed loved necessary borough of Manhattan to a place that would dredge up the untruths of this union almost before we unloaded the moving truck.

Here I was with a second husband and a third child some twenty years younger than his sister and brother an immediate cultural curiosity. Men with peppered hair sat on sandbox edges tipping fingers through the urban salted particles while someone slapping shovels full of sand into a snappy bucket would look up and say *look Dad*. Not so many women peppered hair and slack jaw menstruation more a memory sat stateside at the sandbox with a wee one flinging sand face ward looking up to Momma for approbation. Turned tables turned ultimately on top of me sojourner into a cultural web of oddity. I rode into this fantasy on the crest of hyperbole trapped into the agony of living as an apology for my irrevocable birth date crossed by my chronology generative to a fault but not able to erase or eradicate our age difference. I was almost eight years older and he was zero when I was nearly eight and he was ten when I was hovering eighteen almost able to drink legally in those good old days of the fifties when he was yet to be in middle school and here we were mother and father to a found child we plucked right out of the Paraguayan rainforest. And remarkably I chose this.

Luca from the start was a child for whom the sandbox was a dynasty. A feudal lord he wanted an excise tax for all toys within striking distance. He mined each corner to take possession of all of it. No one's toys belonged to anyone but him they were but on a loan-lease system he engineered in his toddler mind the levy being he could get his hands

on them at any time first strike rights. And at the slide or swing he was always first. It was almost an inborn phenomenon. He had to be first. He couldn't tolerate any other position. It wasn't out of desperation. It just was. And for Luca trees were perches to climb scampering up beyond easy rescue without much difficulty and from which he would lapse into a solemn still gaze fathoming the world into which he was transported and maybe trying to site the one he left behind. *That kid plays with heart* men would say. *He's all boy* my husband's father would proudly exclaim. While park mothers would look on with horror and disdain rampant territoriality a dangerous exposed live wire his competitiveness rubbed against the grain of Upper West Side civil society. Occasionally to add pepper spray to the muted disdain if a child got into Luca's way cast a shadow on his dominance he would jerk them back with a firm tug of hair.

I who cowered at a raised voice and trembled at a raised fist I whose eyes reflected an unfathomable fear at personal danger weathered the park bench unconditionally loving this child this anomaly and as in a close listening to a Bach Cantata so informed he actually was a comfortable fit as my park bench neighbors had never been. I got to disentangle male and grown up aggression without stops without superego with huge justification I got to walk off my own character a verdant receptacle for victimization and learn that a child who feels as if he owns the world does all children own the world our cruelty our insularity is measured in our lack of this recognition.

In a rational logically driven attempt to garner more space and to have a live-in nanny I wiser and older knew that we could not man the logistics of two working parents fixed like butterflies to discarded thrift shop versions of appropriate gender-based rolls without a neutralizer an outsider living in our house. Like an armadillo I had a nose for danger. After living through the exigencies of selling a proletariat ordinary to a fault apartment yet nestled into the verdant very Upper West Side we bought a co-op *that could be worth one million if it were on Park or Fifth*. This new home was eight-and-a-half sprawling rooms with crown molding a working fireplace a working if creaky dumbwaiter multiple windows with trees and light streaming in a washer/dryer but with one hitch it was a walk up sixty-three marble steps never less never more to 4J our apartment. When Luca was about a year old this little invented entourage piecemealed together from fragments of disjointed need and layers of emotional cover-ups left unexplored ventured forth bedlam held at bay just beyond reach. We had yet to fully know that we would resurface in this new home the premise of lives crushing as the fist of truth lifted up and held mirrors of our reflections up to light. There we were again in our pop-up new home the same disjointed us with no real place to escape or modify.

How absolutely foolhardy it was for this unsavory family yet to confront its thicket of rancid self-deceit to leave a boxy architecturally insignificant if newly renovated coop and move to a neighborhood overstocked with *Glatt* kosher markets shoppers in wigs and *Tallit* smug in their insularity. Our Upper West home held our incongruous figment of family life together leaving waters of deceit untroubled. We were but a block from the irresistible pull of Riverside Park another Olmstead and Vaux landscape masterpiece with

gracious tree-lined promenades rising just above the Hudson River. There we could lose ourselves or find ourselves if with a torrent of bitter tears and an escaped mortal scream.

We left the Upper West Side with its pleasures and politics crosscurrents of arrhythmic conversation poets savored musicians revered artists sanctified ideas braided into the emission filled air. Salmon-like we swam upstream north to a colony known as Riverdale *veritable moments from the center of downtown* as Manhattan is called a punishing retributive toll away still in the City if the Bronx connected by land to Westchester and the stiff tariff exacted from its New York City suburban expatriates. Festooned in instincts of practicality I inadvertently blotted out the genesis the essence of his attraction to me an obsessive desire to capture as in fireflies or big game an authentic indigenous *Upper West Sider*. I was that trophy bride and had underestimated or refused to recognize the power of this hunger this aspiration. He was too new to this kingdom of desire still too awkward a *nouveaux liberal* to transport or relocate leaving behind the Upper West Side zip code 10025. He harbored a fearsome dread of being sucked back into the gravy and pastry scents of the loci of Bronx Italian life Arthur Avenue. With the flourish of elaborate calligraphy he wrote and rewrote his return address bold and striking NYC 10025. The ultimate impact of this quicksilver transition had consequences that could not be fathomed or anticipated.

In the family lore of *The Diaspora of Jews* wherever they landed however guarded at heart at essence they remained Jews. A wife spurned or tossed remains a wife if Ex this *feral boy* as his graduate school advisor would refer off-handedly to him became a Jew a caricature quick study Woody Allen Jew a stolen identity werewolf nighttimes sucking the essential ingredients of Jewishness of Upper West Sideness from his wife (me). Avenging his insignificance reviling and swilling from the penal colony ruled by City College academics where he felt mocked and upbraided. This mixed up *goyishe* guy forbidding me at one point from seeing *Schindler's List* he an inveterate Jew baiter a Jew hater a Jew fascinator. The other tack when the wind changed was to assail the female in me somehow all tangled up Jews and girls or women. Subterranean I knew all of this before I arrived sixty-three marble steps up to our new off the grid domain.

By appearances I looked the embodiment a ripe amalgam rolling the vocabulary a professional hand-wrapper of cigars but I too was enamored and cowed by the Upper West Side. My pretensions held up by the webbed feet of mental grasping I cowered was psychologically traumatized by the swirl the hologram of flowerets that bloomed pushed their way beyond the putrid walls of incinerator and ancestral pogrom and sanctified the streets of the Upper West Side accomplished daring defiant. But I sure fooled him or he sure fooled me into thinking it was the woman with the West Side accoutrements he was drawn to and not just the illusion I was of one. I took this man a man who could barely survive being wrenched from his newly planted roots where a sense of disparity and disjunction where a fiction still curdled his lips when asked *so where do you live?* I took this boyish mail order groom from his newly transplanted soil and with that I nearly took the *earth from under his feet*. He was yet to acclimatize to this new natural coveted environment he was not yet assimilated into this intellectual arbor when he was plucked

up river back to the Bronx the Bronx of a childhood fraught with plans to escape and cross over the Harlem River to the new promise land the Upper West Side.

I was the sponsor the mother the foundry bred idealized woman with a torch taking in the tired and poor I was his safe harbor I was the mother of his re-birth. Riverdale was the claustrophobic metaphor of a grand family demise. I had yet to allow myself to truly fathom to get to grasp to know to let seep in the inexorable dimensions of his longing to be indigenous Upper West Side to fully acknowledge that he had taken me on old as I was. This gap in age his coolly calculated arsenal the weaponry to keep me on guard nearly eight years his senior akin to the disparity in age for Charlie Chaplain and Oona O'Neill but calculated not in real years but in perceived disparities. This age business intensified in Riverdale really cutting into the meat of his testes into the mechanisms that spring erections he had taken me on premonitions of sag and droop hands mapped with blue veins liver spots sprouting wrists tolerated if with a gag and limp dick because I was in his mind at least a real live true Upper West Sider. His pornography the graphics of his longings tethered rather pathetically to an icon worship of a Jewish woman believed to have the access and knowledge to the intellectual world so coveted as a choir boy reading in the basement of the church waiting for his liturgical moment. And I could produce even if by adoption an authentic Jewish son for him with all its glorious Upper West Side ramifications and permutations a nice Jewish boy a good Jewish boy a son destined for Jewish type success a dollop off the pages of Philip Roth's, *American Pastoral*. His fervent wish for his *found* son was to achieve off the chart test scores astounding school success an obedient boy the envy of all a boy the best boy what else? Asking always who put me in this trifling world this crazy *orgone box* I put myself in this crazy *orgone box*.

Of course the fact that I had not seen a nice Jewish boy up close since I left high school and further had vowed never to date one after I was eighteen and that I had denied my Judaism with an unequivocal fervor. Motives are like archaeological digs ultimately speculative and inscrutable. I begged off religious practices of Judaism though fiercely and publicly Jewish staring down unrelenting anti-Semitism just at the tip of my tongue at all introductions the very words *Hello, I'm Jewish*. Recounting a collective past an anthropological study of my graduating class at Weequahic High School in Newark, New Jersey immortalized in the book *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital Culture, and the Class of 1958* by MacArthur genius award winner and classmate Sherry Ortner and coincidentally attended by Philip Roth who wrote of it in *Goodbye Columbus*. We were a rat pack of Jewish high achievers fledging first or second generation American born yet to vacate the very ghettoized enclave of the Weequahic section of Newark for the nouveau riche South Orange suburbs our families earnestly working toward real estate down payments. We became doctors and lawyers living for the most part in substantial homes in South Orange or the environs holding memberships to conservative or reform synagogues never missing a high holiday most of whom produced progeny worthy if still with quotas of the Ivy League. Sad statistic recounted in the book the very small minority of black classmates seemed to have disproportionate number of premature deaths primarily in the forties. I was in the section of the book about people who took alternative routes meaning more mixed up and disconnected than most of my fellow

classmates. And in my extensive interview remember telling her that I could never ever figure out Judaism what it meant to be a Jew and that I had flunked marriage perplexed and flummoxed by the institution with a never ending desire gnawing at my insides for true love.

To the blue collar altar boy from the Bronx with unassuageable hungers to mutate into the dignified if scruffy unkemptness of New York longing for the New York of Allen Ginsberg and company for authentic Jewish intellectualism the kind that drove him into hysterical rashes and allergies at City College the Jews of the big words and the big ideas and the denigrating clipped speech and the sneer those were the Jews I was in the collective to represent. I was the Upper West Side paragon an inverted *Joyce Johnson* (*girlfriend of Jack Kerouac*) retread at the bar of *The West End* askew the booth holding the ghosts of Ginsberg and Kerouac. One of the fixtures although tragically flawed of the immediate neighborhood had been his erstwhile professor of political science at City College a man who made a profession out of being relaxed in his appearance *in extremis* and who had intrigued but scared the boy who traversed a million miles each day from his enclave of Italian Bronx to City College. I guess I was suppose to be an embodiment of this Professor only a female incarnation and only a little more kempt if a little less brilliant. I was suckered in by his hunger his manifest destiny once again retreating becoming critically unknowable my twisted childhood flung me from pillar to post my Jewish identity at once spurned and embraced by a mother living in the nettle of extreme assimilation and perpetual dislocation. The lure of the Upper West Side cut slack to feminine wiles until we washed up on shore in this little slice of *no man's land* called Riverdale.

Rehash and go over *Thirteen Ways of Looking... (Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird Wallace Stevens)* and so we swam salmon-like upstream north to our sought after architecturally desirable eight room apartment to a colony known as Riverdale a spit away from the center of *downtown* as Manhattan is called by the natives a \$2.00 toll away on the Henry Hudson Drive and by subway on the number one followed by a long wait for the quick bus ride up the hill to the lofty reaches of Riverdale. *So near yet so far* I had miscalculated or underplayed the genesis of Frank's attraction to me the fact that high on my list of gleaming attributes was that in his eyes I was indigenous Upper West Side. I underestimated or refused to recognize the power of his near obsession his hunger his desperate need to fold into this kingdom of his desire. He was still an awkward nouveaux liberal intellectual still attached to the life support of a particular zip code 10025 to be removed and transplanted without a consequence that even I could not anticipate. I had the confidence the longevity to take the zip code with me it was internalized I was firmly entrenched if I had been held captive by the ambidextrous use of multiple languages the incessant barrage of obscure and often elusive literary and historical references I had the aura the idiom in this swim upwind of the mighty Hudson in 1990. An expensive renovation with a brilliant continually drunk contractor made the apartment the envy of all. Upper West Side friends who came once on a troublesome Friday night battling traffic and tolls and huffing their way up the sixty-three marble stairs exclaimed entering while gasping for air *Ooh and Aah* and never came back again. I was left with my pup and my found child still to grasp the fullness of my predicament

once again tossing it like lint from a pocket on Yom Kippur into a troubled waterway my life. We moved rupturing this fragile connection to his newly adopted ancestral home when his lips were still wet with longing his appetites unabated a plant lugged across equatorial lands dug into a soil only to wilt and rot. I uprooted him in the quest for more space with the foresight that we could not survive as good parents two working parents simultaneously premonitions start to tingle way before they set in decibels that are impossible to ignore.

In a remote upstate motel on one of our numerous jaunts to find that little piece of rural paradise to ameliorate the loss of our dear Manhattan island in this motel impinging on midnight he started shouting out almost as if he had *Tourettes Syndrome* over and over *give me the money give me the money I want all of your money!* Stunned by this waif from nowhere in the Bronx an altar boy screeching out interminably *give me the money* an owl shadowing the moon presiding over the demise the futility the danger of my choice I was captive of a demonically driven mad no man's land individual interloper cipher poseur. *Give me the money* as if I was the moneylender the *Shylock* the archetypical rich thieving conniving Jew I hear this chant still fresh as if it were last night's midnight. Recounting to say how dumb I was to live so far north with the incantations of this bandit *Ganiff* trying to exact a high tariff in exchange for a feigned arousal and occasional obligatory fuck. In the agreement if unwritten I was to get him contacts and connections with the Jews of *The New York Review of Books* with the ultimate goal of getting him into the Ph.D. program at Teachers College and the affixing of a Ph.D. after his name. This in exchange for nose holding fucks followed by a barrage of inflammatory denigrating remarks about the fact that I was bereft of all feminine wiles and had the stench of stopped up backed up female sexuality. And to think humbly that it was I who bought him his first Foucault reader, which formed the genesis of his dissertation. His TC mentor to fellow colleagues would refer to him as a *feral student* exuding a poignant neediness a perpetual need to suck up with the grandiosity or *chutzpah* to take on such a thinker as Foucault. *It was I* as in *Who Killed Cocky Robin* who moved with him northwards and myself closer to the edge of perpetual nightmare.

I needed a nanny to keep the balance. To overhear to bear witness to watch the unraveling the gathering upheaval and stop it just short of police calls if just by breathing the common 2400 square foot air. Either I draw as if fly paper havoc or stir up a bitter brew ruffling a restrained unconscious into a topspin of rage and fisticuffs or even weaponry hostage to a loaded gun in marriage one I draw out the unsettled a *hold no prisoners* space for outrage and expressions of furor just beyond the bounds of acceptable. And to my own detriment I who by now embodied the Upper West Side took the brood mare the suckling infant away and as we placed art and furniture at least illusory *million dollar* apartment crown molding French doors hard wood floors working fireplace the edges began to fray. We were not good transplants. He for his unrequited quest to live his life as a *born again* Jewish scholar yet of cult Foucault his skiddish transformation needed zip code 10025 as a baby needs a *blanky*. As his new identity fragmented anti-Semitic Jewish slurs freakishly fomented wincing the number of times he disparaged or grammatically affixed the word Jew as noun verb or adjective to

whatever he was saying. And I walking the tight few block neighborhood to find the lodestone scruff familiar a *Bead Game* (Hermann Hesse) blind-sided by the number of Glatt Kosher stores lining the treeless flowerless main shopping street itself gasping for an infusion of oxygen quipping in my tour *nothing here but a glut of Glatt*. *Chickens come home to roost* Riverdale challenged and mocked my inner balance it a danger zone by which I was perpetually unnerved having tucked safely away disturbing questions about what it meant to be a Jew was it a race a culture a tribe a religion or a source of great bonding humor over latkes *Kreplach* and a Sabbath's dripping tallow. Thrown pillar to post being told I was *just an American* when asked at six if I was Jewish later suffering a barrage of insults because I was a *self-hating Jew a destiny you cannot escape or deny* my mother incessant wringer warnings in her zealous reclamation of a Jewish identity *once a Jew always a Jew*. I who *downtown* in Manhattan skirted Jews marching in flank in full ultra conservative near caricature garb crossing the street averting my eyes holding back a grimace now was in danger of being hit by a car no where to look away from people I was finding increasingly repugnant. Secular Jew rapidly became a descriptor when asked often at the supermarket check out line are you a Jew?

Tethering us as husband and wife a common need to be one with Jews in zip code 10025 or away from Jews on such ostentatious and self-righteous display. Riverdale hollow place individuals anchored by a religious affiliation still a large number of Catholic residents not one of who would claim being *lapsed*. Riverdale was also home to the IRA (Irish Republican Army) sympathizers mothers of bruising police or fire fighters or supers starting the day crossing themselves kneeling prayerful at the local churches Sundays shopping at the northern end of Riverdale or in the foothills just off Upper Broadway. My current husband (to whom did I promise what?) *latching* onto me an infant to an engorged breast a suckling finding his way through the *Stations of the Cross* of graduate academic life at Teachers College Columbia University. And I to keep from *speaking tongues* would pretend on frequent and necessary neighborhood shopping trips that I was on a year abroad in Eastern Europe in Poland trying to track down ancestral roots recapture the essence of rural village life from which my grandparents fled leaving behind family members who died among the six million in the Holocaust anything to ennoble my life in this peculiar place.

Each day after paying the toll as I drove down the Henry Hudson Parkway to take Luca to his Manhattan school and me to my job in the West Village at first sighting of the Hudson River and the Manhattan skyline would have an accelerated heart beat as if spotting a former lover on the street. I was a hopeless love sick nomad relocated interred. Needing to escape the women with fingers pronged freshly manicured and painted screaming reds gingerly placing groceries at the check-out counter with stiffly sprayed newly coifed blond hair anomalous for Jews. Of note the ultra Jews had their own shops never entering an establishment selling non-kosher products *Treif*. I was becoming intolerant a bigot a character trait I foreswore taking over my insides. I longed for the allure of the West Side Market where people in checkout lines would utter a random political commentary affirming a common bond of like-mindedness where Buber-like relationships flowered and died all within checkout time. We were like beached whales foundering having strayed too far off course our marriage began its fray having been

based on an absurdist premise. Our found child squealed and romped as if landing in paradise and upon entering the door he would don a super hero outfit and race through the 2400 square feet hooting out rapturous madly happy sounds. We roamed the house we roamed the streets trying at first to justify the move and then the acerbity struck a vein and the oil of discontent flowed reigned. Weekdays we headed to our respective locations all in Manhattan and weekends found us racing toward *downtown* ball fields for Luca's soccer and baseball teams.

Riverdale frightened me. It scared me with its dead-end shopping metropolis and the vapid looks not a glint not a smile an expressed aversion to otherness with a quick sweep of eyes. Riverdale inhabited an almost exquisite aura of disdain for the unfamiliar the *stranger*. Cold this place was cold an icy dehumanizing cold fleshless unapproachable and unbeautiful. Eyes never met. Sparks of friendship connection even love as in *I and Thou* (Buber) non-existent. Curious place Riverdale ghettoized in perpetuity versions of godliness building immutable barriers I was a trespasser *fremdeln* overstepping bounds belonging to the receptacle of streaming godless humanity residing in what they called *the City*.

I longed for my Manhattan with cellos hoisted on backs computers strapped across two shoulders shoes spit shined editors novelists Nobel Laureates all on the street rushing by me. Or the gut swelling sight of the humbled the broken the mad hands out for a clicking coin a past to erase not to trace and the fleeting moments of human exchange dug into a complicitous sorrow and a gnawing need to respond. A common thread common denominator connected the Upper West Side and Riverdale the fact that we were all exiles if once or twice removed a composite the scattershot displaced pursued relentlessly by a Holocaust and the fiery dragon breath of *never again never again*. The uncompromising intellectual secular Jew and the stubborn ornery 18th century resurrected Jew defiantly dressed never to surrender a curlicue sideburn to enflame the other daring a sneer or hostile look. We were joined by blood and history never to trifle or deny an historical identity beyond fathoming. So I walked to and from the local shopping district consumed by magical thinking and the pretext that I was a homing bird coming to retrace a family tree.

And inside the 2400 square foot Riverdale walk up under a spell of a strange machination a crazy twist of fate I was called up in return for sexual favors if with a held nose to act toward my husband my newbie as if he were an anointed fastidious Jewish scholar shushing Luca dashing about the sprawling apartment always dressed as some superhero unsettling the thinker despite my warnings and requests for greater quiet and respect. The marriage was unraveling as I stooped back schlepped groceries and books to feed the insatiable philosopher in the making. From cute sexy guy who could fuck on a dime he became a prince a scholar with a Jewish wife who deep in ancestral memory knew how to be the caretaker of a man hunched over a text the next breath giveth by dint of the level of respect. Feigning discomfort with Jews to cover his zealot Jewish yearnings disparaging all things and people Jewish not to visit the *Holocaust* Museum or see *Schindler's List*. With the bit and bite of life left in me quipping *you are letting your Jewish hating quotient rise* as if adolescent he would shut his hearing off returning with

greater ardor to Bataille Foucault the books of his resonant Talmudic like studies and I the librarian who introduced these texts believing in exchange he would keep me young with his daily ministrations. How wrong our marriage unraveling as he sucked from the cup of knowledge. Riverdale life for him became an agony if the apartment and his life there a prince in a castle. These were not the Jews he chose to walk among. And his tempers and furies with Luca inflamed as his discontent and feeling of being cheated intensified.

Lies in life acid burning away vibrancy I became less and less as he became more and more *I am on the way up you down* he would frequently quipped. He was afire with a burgeoning new identity Luca in some sordid way a reminder of the boy he was desperate to leave behind. Luca became the target for not measuring up a designate Bar Mitzvah Ivy League bound boy of four. Motherhood was my crucible my sexuality still displaced and ill-defined but attack a child of mine and I rose up a virtual *Joan of Arc* daring him or anyone else to disparage or hurt or damage a baby if not originally born of my body. Luca gathered up toy gun upon toy gun a veritable stock-pile to defend himself against his hair pulling berating father who cavalierly threw the weaponry into a pillow case and got me my heart sinking to toss them off on a drive up the Henry Hudson Highway Luca looking on with sheer horror as I tossed the plastic non-biodegradable sack of guns. That was the first and last step I ever took toward the *virtual ovens* he was firing up *never again never again* going forward a mantra.

Weaponry taken, Luca only got more wild fired up with greater rage at his father the kind that only can come for the pure heat of an angry and fearful four year old. There I was once again in a home dangerous onerous the inevitable end destruction of a marriage and a tattered family left in disarray. It is in me not in him and not in the streets of Riverdale I brought him here I the high priest he the choir boy books lifted from basement corridors to an elegant if poorly located apartment with French doors crown molding and a separate dining room. Judgment made not from inner voices but on functional pragmatic terms predictably the marriage unraveled clues breadcrumb trail all led to Riverdale also known as the Bronx. The found child our son would increasingly gather experts like moths to light declaiming him as hyperactive or wild. Early as a nursery school student at the iconic Bank Street School psychological pyrotechnics ellipses tourniquet tongue twisting bang-on gang-bangers from the driftwood cult of cannibalistic school-based evaluation teams hit squads moved in on him. Declarative absolute in that child a monster brews gone obliterated what once was an affectionate child with a rare alluring capacity to connect with others displaced child barely weaned another who could not conform or adapt to the genetic coding of middle class American propriety. In New York City there was a singular intolerance for children refusing to ride the conveyor belt of acceptability who sat outside the circle of the norm the water lily penultimate steps to the higher echelons of society. Here a child an outlier whose very own father pushed the finger to start the rides at the bureaucratic carnival.

Annie was hired with sound references to be our Nanny living in the *maid's room* week days and home to Queens on the weekends this being the entire justification for moving to our spacious apartment in Riverdale. Annie Jamaican with purple back skin and a big

boned frame left her own son exactly Luca's age back home with family as she worked like so many in the *Caribbean Nanny army*. Annie broke off into *Patois* on her frequent calls home filled with giddiness and ending with tears. Quickly evident Annie was the exact right antidote to the family dynamic unflappable Luca immediately gravitating to nesting in her arms a safe space without condition. Notable even compelling Annie's near preoccupation with her hair turning up at various points of the day coiffed in the most imaginative and decorative styles.

Hair firing up deep and onerous biblical dimensions my own life a struggle to tame curls as early as three or four my mother tugging them straight possessed by assimilation's zeal *you do this to me they make you look so Jewish* calling out as she pounded on my head to gain control over obstinate curls. Later on beyond her physical domain I continued the practice of hair straightening using harsh chemicals until with a political sense of camaraderie with Angela Davis I sprouted a very respectable *Afro*. Problematic hair never better told than in a disturbing even horrifying video of Marina Abramovic brushing her hair with increasingly mean assaults punishing gestures twisting and moaning with agony unable to stop.

«Art must be beautiful» *I brush my hair with a metal brush held in my right hand and simultaneously comb my hair with a metal comb held in my left hand. While so doing, I continuously repeat 'Art must be beautiful', 'Artist must be beautiful', until I have destroyed my hair and face.*

Marina Abramovic

Luca began his school life with Annie in the three time weekly *caregiver and me* classes at the prestigious Presbyterian Nursery School. In the first hours a fellow classmate dared to touch a truck at the sand table in the opposite corner when Luca lunged for her hair tugging the little truck she held onto shrieking. The lead teacher intervening in a muted voice using only the pronoun *we*, *children you know we don't pull hair, we don't have a sand table all to ourselves, we share and we play together*. Evident that the pronoun *I* was to be left at the door this was a collective effort where the expectation was that *we all play nicely together* and so began the civilizing of the savage beast a conformity to which Luca could not adhere and for which Annie held clear disdain. When Annie recounted this tale with heart and provenance Frank left his scholarly lair combative protective embarrassed disparaging rhetorical ideological finger pointing with an implicit racial slur that if Annie had better control over Luca this would not have happened. Annie watching this display of frenzy following her accounting of the first morning in school walked off taking Luca to her room closing the door. Vindicated blessed knowing that Annie was indeed a divine presence in a household veering toward an extremely destructive course to break and tame this *wild* found indigenous child

From that day forward Frank joined the side of the rapidly increasing chorus of professional hit squad members alerting us to Luca's increasing incorrigible behaviors his waywardness his unsuitability for elitist exclusive educational domains. It became a matter of life and breath for Frank that he numb drug punish subdue Luca until he fit in to the world which Frank felt entitled to and was desperate to join. Blurting out voice raised decibel splitting, *this is my only child, my son and you have other children, this is my only one*. Ruptured abandoned any parental bond we had following this storm this vicious vituperative out burst. With the adoption he had awakened the tolerant mother now looming an aroused fierce mother protector who would battle him without constraints if with a formidable sorrow that we had dared to take Luca an indigenous found child from a tree house home on stilts serenaded by parrots deep in the rain forest of Paraguay. The

cut was inviolate deep and sordid, *this is my only child, my son...you have other children, this is my only one* rang in all almost incessant conversations involving Luca's acceptability in *the right worlds*. He having left Luca and me in Paraguay two days after the adoption *having to get back* could not reckon the bond that formed as we waited interminably for the government of Paraguay to clear our way to return to the USA. Luca and I built of sense of unity encircled by doting women that would never in a never to be predicted future to be blown asunder severed.

This little baby nestled between my breasts brought to song every melody in my repertoire from *Strange Fruit* to *All the Pretty Little Horses* and I read poem after poem in English from the one book I fortuitously brought along with me, *Poems of Latin American Women*. As he went from struggling medically *losing vitality* to robustness the Paraguayan Pediatrician whom we had contacted before even coming to adopt Luca lavished compliments and admiration *this is for sure a love child* Luca having gone from failing to the eightieth percentile in little over three weeks. When Luca was not a nestling baby bird he was held tightly to the breasts of the six or so other woman who lived as I did with the lawyer. His wife guarded and perhaps jealous of my necessary as air attachment to her husband held the infant least. Although mother to now three children I was committed to remaining in Paraguay until both of us could get out. Frank's swift departure stoked an intractable family bifurcation and there would never come a moment when I would relinquish this child or subdue him for the father's comfort. An ever widening chasm rose between us no way to anticipate the cavernous distances between our views of parenting and our expectations for this child.

Rising from within Frank a *Leviathan* of inhumane dimensions willing to sanitize Luca to appease to whatever group of experts at the moment were confronting us with Luca's unsuitability for their environment Frank had this insatiable need to scrub Luca clean of any personality traits that others found discomfiting. For what and to whom had I almost sold my soul I was the mother who called the *Right Reverend Mother Ruth* principal at Rebecca and Jeremy's school Saint Hilda's and Saint Hughes unchristian because of the use of multiple pejoratives in a school report to which in sum she agreed. I was the mother declaring to Rebecca and Jeremy without exception prior to any meeting with school or any other official that *right or wrong you are right* that I would never take the side of the outsider if once in the sanctity of our home we could have more nuanced extended conversation. As the hit squad whipped up its ascendant star Frank I devised a plan whereby I would purchase a horse ranch in Wyoming where Luca and I would raise and train stallions Luca running free and home schooled.

The antagonism morphed into revulsion the wedding band smelting the vows scorched. To my deepest shame there was a moment in time that again when I tossed the toy guns pillowcase and all from the car Frank got me to break with myself and have Luca doped up so that *he could fit in* remain in the pre-school of Bank Street where Frank worked as an instructor in its graduate program. Nausea kicks up when just the barest recollection of that time period Luca being four to six kicks up. I impugn myself a greedy participant in that mad dance around this child's funeral pyre for we were trying to get a part of him to die off so that he could fit in. Recalling the day I escorted a class trip Luca in needing

to be carried tucking his head under my chin while he dozed or hid never knew which. Conscripted love heart cut off what ever remnant of good feeling I had for Frank now an object of contempt wishing he would rot and spoil like meat left out of a refrigerator the butcher's son no longer had that cool temperature right space in me.

The marriage over but for the signatures on divorce papers at my father's memorial service coincidentally dying on April 16th, 1998 on our 10th anniversary still not public the pending divorce following a conversation with a relative cornered me spewing vitriol hot lava and here I quote, *your family is no less trash than mine, your father's mother was a whore, your grandparents' families were peasants! He is my only son*, those words resonated and I knew fully well he deserved to have none. Once again I was the gunrunner for a rare breed of narcissist my body a host for this contaminated level of pathology what harbor spawned my heart? I muttered to myself, *Dad I am so sorry, so very sorry*. As a qualifier I grew into thinking of him as *trash* but never his family repudiating my mother when she referred from her self-proclaimed elevated status to them as *salt of the earth*.

The parental discord guns a blazing took place around discipline. He believed *you do as I say so coupled with wait until your father gets home* and it a mortal sin for one parent to contradict or hold a different opinion in the presence of a child. Born and bred on Dr. Benjamin Spock even with the lunacy of a crazy mother democracy and democratic practice limned that parent lexicography. Socratic minutes into hours spent asking questions soliciting opinions waiting for the best decision to formulate every input and point of view explored exhaustively *which park when and what to take*. Imagining his ultimate fall from grace dressed for a stroll with infant son as in an Italian village passing all the left-leaning intelligentsia racing along side their children sneakers and torn jeans the exuberance contagious everyone's eyes crinkly with smiles. Sunday streets were anarchistic and wild and into this fray there we would be in our Sunday best. And this was the colony the club he was desperate to join his twisted desires caught him up. Driven into a tizzy as he observed my inquiring *Luca do you want carrots or peas, no, what then?* Frank would fume like a dragon *he should eat what's put before him no questions asked. No I respond I believe this is the beginning of building up decision-making muscles he has to decide and let us know. And are you contradicting me in front of him my mother never contradicting my father in front of us*. So here it was the fissure it had come and it was to be about child rearing practices.

Incensed disrespected he went on the offensive got me every which way my age my lack of feminine wiles that I was on my way out professionally but he could not at the bulbous root of tyranny and nub bed grub root taproot bitterroot dislodge or separate me from me as a mommy. Parenting set up battlements war fronts the old country Jew against Catholic Southern Italian and it was indeed a battle to the death ultimately of our marriage. How I had become reduced like sauce or gravy to religious wars? Frank felt his authority as a parent was clearly and always being undercut and I was sickened whenever I toppled into the encampment of the enemy forcing drugs on Luca the only alternative at the moment the little reverie of a horse ranch in Wyoming. Caught in the

claw tooth of decision-making contradiction and a look of revulsion tossed my way at my lack of femininity and the record-breaking speed at which I was aging. Luca once said after a tennis match he was about nine *never underestimate your enemy*,

Embattled at pre-school Luca moved into a world of block building a solitary endeavor intolerant of an intruder child or adult. His structures as if from an architectural plan could not be taken down he battled off anyone attempting to do so and this in a class in which block building was a curricular centerpiece and although equipped with multiple sets Luca's buildings took up more than his generous share. In an enlightened moment filled more with empathy than necessity Luca was given a Polaroid to keep a record of his structures and therefore release blocks for common use. Luca refused to sit in the circle the essential formation of community building in which children exchanged information and opinions and learned about the day month year and weather. Frustration with Luca was building as a furnace overheating and experts were lead into the room to observe him record his actions and behavior preparing for a convening in which we would be alerted to the fact that we had a child with a problem and not that the school had yet found a way to reach out to him the experts were busy preparing a rap sheet to rid themselves of Luca for a place *better suited*. It was clear from the start that Frank sat on the side of the room with this *coterie posse of experts*. To describe the despair I felt as I came to acknowledge the disregard and marginalization leveled at me along with contrite pity that I happened to wind up Luca's mother. How to tolerate malevolence pushed so far beyond any common bound of decency or civility? How did I wind up in this ring of fire with a man I found contemptible a father who turned so against his own son?

First Luca was tossed from the Bank Street afterschool program he was hardly six they apparently couldn't *manage his behavior* and this was the warning of what was to come these afterschool teachers were closely aligned with the day school faculty. Luca loved going to the afterschool program where he could run unrestrained and call out with great glee to the sky and clouds and now in no way could he fathom why he was excluded. This was a first step in ridding themselves of him next he was set apart from his classmates sitting on in reality a dunce chair in the corner and when he would struggle free they locked him in a room where he pounded and bellowed while they stood outside stern and unremitting calling this some form of behavior modification. Next in a series of meetings we were told about Luca's reprehensible and disturbing behavior as noted by the expert psychologist the dean the teacher and the head of the school. Frank bobbing his head like a Halloween apple had fallen under their spell and kicked me as they say *under the bus or to the curb*. He was firmly and squarely one of them.

I sat there fuming needing to make a plan an alternate route an underground railway of successful educational opportunities for our Luca our *wild child our genius child**, (Langston Hughes). Buying time as I looked for alternatives I informed them concealing my rage that I had registered Luca in *Schwartzie's the Rangers* an estimable West Side afterschool institution which would come and claim Luca after school pop him into their bus and take him along with the other *wild boys* to Central Park where they played season appropriate sports no matter the weather and returned them soaked muddied-up at around 5pm. Luca spilled off the bus rapturous and filled with stories about his adventures in the

Park and they held him in a kind of awe a boy with spirit and heart and wild physical or athletic abilities. Frank with idolatry for rough and tumble athletes again would look with favor on Luca and the potential of his blooming promising athletic prowess according to these sports experts.

*This is a song for the genius child.
Sing it softly, for the song is wild.
Sing it softly as ever you can -
Lest the song get out of hand.

Nobody loves a genius child.

Can you love an eagle,
Tame or wild?
Can you love an eagle,
Wild or tame?
Can you love a monster
Of frightening name?

Nobody loves a genius child.

Kill him - and let his soul run wild.
Langston Hughes

As fortune would have it a former colleague had become the principal of a parent generated public school right around the corner from his current school and offered Luca a place starting the following week. Jumping ship in January when he was six and verging on arrest or a padded mental institution room we changed schools. On the final day the school issued a letter for parents in the class which was to be read aloud and distributed at the end of the day it said something like *Luca's family have found a school better suited to his needs* (code for special needs or handicapped). I got there in time to rewrite the letter and to say that *we found a better school reflective of our educational and personal values* and told the Dean hands trembling as he ran to retrieve and redistribute the parting communication to class families *if you don't give this out and if you say anything to contradict what is in the content and spirit of this I will slap a law suit on your ass* and that is a quote. Of course Frank was not present but hiding somewhere in his office he by now a full-time faculty member at the graduate school of which this was a lab school.

As we gathered in the car to return to Riverdale we said little. Luca knew he was going to a new school on Monday but was thinking about the little girl his classmate who said when hearing of his departure *this is the worse day of my life*. Not so many years later the lead teacher was found to be mentally troubled and unfit to work with young children particularly boys. Classmates Luca would meet on the street or in the West Side soccer league always told him how much they missed him. The children witnessing Luca's abusive treatment a classmate they savored for his energy and creativity were hurt and even damaged as I learned from many of their parents. Sadly school became an uncomfortable fit for Luca always waiting to be scolded and marginalized and never able

to change who he was turn himself somehow right. At the new school an enlightened and wise teacher suggested that Luca not sit in the circle at morning meetings and could be elsewhere as long as he didn't interfere with the conversation in the circle referring there after to Luca as the *long distance listener*. Another teacher in the next grade gave him the keys to the computer room to which he could go as the need struck him the condition being to put the keys back in place and keep up with lessons if in his own way. But the doubt and skittishness about how to act in such a place as school was an arduous and complex journey.

Besotted a cascade fervor in extremis of finger pointers note takers diagnosis makers' decision holders his father and I collapsed into tail chasing frenzy and rage no middle ground in this tug and pull. Worldviews became religious canon heated every word every phrase nuance thrown to the wind. Enemy epithets drawing blood deficient having no feminine wiles left me witless against a hapless gladiator shield and sword this was a pathos drenching war. He pushed his way toward me agreed to adopt a child with me and marry me all the while getting away with holding his nose bedtimes chasing skirts with his eyes and who knows what else my saddened eyes looking away fear of scorching by his devout brazenness.

Christmas time following the great changing of schools brought us to Los Angeles to be with Jeremy now living in Manhattan Beach notorious for being the hiding place of a colony of Weathermen fugitives from the law left-over's from the '60's. Jeremy's apartment was a short walk from the Pacific, which captivated Luca the complexity of the natural world moved through him a spirit a vessel for its very mystery and wonder. Jeremy and Luca shared a love of the natural world and found an easy camaraderie. Jeremy had from the start looked on Frank with disdain finding him poseur and cipher information withheld initially out of respect for my obvious need for a companion. *This is my one son* father believed that he should have been the one so anointed by Jeremy's *privilege* and educational opportunities if conscripting him to edit and rewrite much of his dissertation on Foucault. It was actually Jeremy's pleading his steady remonstrance's that pushed me to get Luca the hell out of Bank Street at any cost. Jeremy loved Christmas and he and his current partner Kara seemed genuinely delighted we were there the house festively decorated a traditional tree the centerpiece.

As days went by Frank became like tinder ready to burst into heady flame. Jeremy and Luca found an easy alliance running in and out of the sea. And then Frank burst into a fury ordering Luca to go to bed prematurely before his bedtime. Luca was getting on his nerves and then Frank flew after the obstinate son refusing to obey dragging him off to the guest room tugging on his hair. Luca responded with pain yelping and shrieking Frank not relenting until a knock on the door it was the police neighbors hearing the child screaming had called them. Luca in a total betrayal of filial loyalty told the cops *my father is hurting me trying to murder me help me help me*. The police in response speaking more to Jeremy with askance looks toward Frank warned that it was not to happen again *hear me pop and take it a little easy boy try listening to him* and with that they left. Here David and Goliath dad and boy mythic premonitions of a great father son unraveling. Again I wondered looking out to the Pacific how I brought this man into my

into our lives what could have been on my mind was I subject to that level of naïveté and female desperation and longing?

Hand-wrestled to defeat this father of a lone found son dissembled before our eyes his torment at the trials of fatherhood got him hair pulling ear-lobe biting pummeling in the line-up of experts finger-pointing at our aberrant wild son with a string of diagnosis bows on a kite streaming this way and that in the clouds. I mother and keeper of *right or wrong you are right* to any outside home and family found my husband the father of our child in opposition in collusion this a complete abrogation of his biblical responsibility. At one point in our contra-temps when I pointed out that again he drifted off into the bosom of the enemy he looked at me eyes narrowing like a fox at prey and blurted out, *I despise you*. And that followed by you *stand in front of me I defer*. *You smelly old dominate sexless bitch*.

Jeremy was called him *The Thin Man (The Thin Man by Dashiell Hammett)* thin as in without heft and substance body and he was that. The more he railed and pelted me with insults the more heated frenzied and furious his parenting the tighter the circumference the encampment he lived in a preserve of himself in a room he called study in our sprawling apartment in *ugh* Riverdale. Savoring his marginalization he ran to female students who wouldn't hesitate to call Saturday midnights indulging them with long *teacher to student phone conferences* he drew these from the well of students in his Advisory the centerpiece of the Bank Street College graduate program. Predator professor affixed with a Teachers College Ph.D. his students preparing to become leaders in public schools were his perfect flock of supplicants he had found his rightful place and would turn often from us to attend to his students.

Thinking back it would have been wise to adopt Luca on my own while down in Paraguay there were single women among the adoptive parents. Marriage an institution I mistrusted when I was eighteen having submitted disastrously once now had me again in its vise. When my father who knew me most closely heard I was adopting a child his response *wondering just when you were going to do it*. So here I was married to a man as mean-spirited as any I had ever read about sharing a child and any possibility for love as dim as tulips blooming in frosty January. He was to have taken me aloft into the world of sizzling sex the hot springs of *Ischia* the well spring for eternal suppleness youthfulness still veiled by mystery someone who would dredge up my long dormant urges and desires. He a master teacher lifting me skyward sailing silver winged a *pounding swan soaring aflame consumed rapturous rather I was held tight in talons captive of a man turned raptor.

*Leda and the Swan William Butler Yeats

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower[20]
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,

So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

Catching you up in the crosshairs of how life tumbled knocked me off balance sent me scurrying into a despair not felt since my early thirties mother of two young children with another predator husband. Raptor and predator two men at two different points in life yet to reach menopause promising to love and keep until death did us part. Question not they're desire to have me as a partner but how little evolved I was to give myself up as an offering. Further I never connected having children or becoming a mother with being married the rational part of me eschewed the institution scattershot I struggle to confront the force that drove me twice into punishing marriages and its dangerous coupling for me motherhood. Rereading this sickens me took so many years of my life shredded emptying my pocket of sinfulness on a singular day of atonement my own crafted Yom Kippur. Seeing acknowledging I was a very unformed girl longing finally for an impossibly crazily embracing infancy and the continual need to punish myself for having failed to get make have my mother love me rapturously from the very first and ever after.

Luca child of nowhere of some obscure dot on a map and a perpetual improvised history ours to write and rewrite a couple of jazz scat songsters. The givens a rain forest bordering Brazil on the Parana River just next to Argentina a movie *The Mission* which told of the Jesuits who found these *dear Indians, Guarani* who had a knack for singing like angels and living in perfect communal harmony their huts or houses on stilts in close repose. The thicket of vestigial forest filled with parrot squawking and song perched on the edge of the Iguassu Falls one of the designate wonders of the world. Out of this celestial cloth we wove a story of ancestry Luca always believing once he saw the movie *The Mission* that he was the infant in the canoe in its closing moments. The only hard information we had was that his birth mother Lucia had placed herself in the care of the state health system following all protocol to rightfully have him designated as an *abandoned baby* at birth and within hours he was in the care of a foster mother and she, just sixteen, returning to her village *Pointe Kyi*. Lucia in official documents said she was giving her baby up so that he would have a chance for *a good education*. In one of life's absurdist reckonings we take a proud son of Paraguay, they don't like to part with boys having so few so many being lost in recent border wars with Bolivia, we take this child from a home on stilts with parrots flying hither and yon sounds of the roaring Falls and

bring him to New York City into a marriage that was doomed rife with ugliness and torment and for whom education turned into a dangerous unremitting bad wrong evil proposition. If only heartache were all but with wide-open eyes I stepped into this paradise to pluck a fruit the serpents tongue a lick away.

I didn't ask to be born the horn of power twisting trembling throughout childhood in most households at least in privileged college born homes. Soon apparent that Luca daily chooses us as mother and father while I gulp hard wondering if we are worth the choice even without alternative. Luca of blank Luca who would only rarely cry out *I'm going home, I want to go home, I want to be with my mother, Lucia*. Luca four or five or six would take out his back pack at these moments and stuff everything he loved or needed including some remaining hidden away plastic pistols and guns and storm toward the door his rich imagination holding him carrying him on wind shafts his daunting imagination finding no barrier to soaring through the clouds and wind to a waiting Lucia. From the start Luca knew about his birth mother and the village from which she came pinpointed on a map on his wall knew he was primarily Guaraní Indian with a splash of an unidentified something else and had watched the movie *The Mission* repeatedly telling the story of *his people* and that Lucia parted with him so that he could have a chance for a better education. This recounting a trenchant whiplash looking back our found son backpack at door plastic guns ready for the shoot out and we the glistening enemy. Watching Luca at the door I knew I had to decouple from Frank cut myself off from him kill him off as husband limiting his role as father to keep Luca from being even more damaged hurt or destroyed. The man/woman the Adam/Eve and into the mix the indigenous child who crawled up through some curious landscape into our lives or who fell out of some preternatural tree our apple our enticement our forbidden fruit for we stood on already depleted soil, soil arid with lies and deceit.

Short of moving to that horse ranch in Wyoming we discovered sports. Luca was most at home on a playing field whether soccer or baseball uncanny from the start he was a strategic instinctive player while most of the other six and seven year olds just ran back and forth he would position the ball and run it to a goal. Luca played with grace as if moving with the wind an expression of the sublime he was in his element racing up and down a field and was just as happy to turn the ball over to friends and let someone else make the kick or pass and seemed almost always to wind up mid-field. Yet in school in any line he had to be first meaning it was a physical and urgent need. He became a valued member of whatever team in the West Side Soccer League we grandfathered in because we had lived in Manhattan further Luca attended public school there as well. Saturday or Sunday had us driving down the Henry Hudson for soccer games and in the spring for baseball. Families brought snacks at least once during the season for each sport all of us set to laughter as the baseball coach knocked on each little guys crotch to see if he on his guard. The weekend sports structure suited our family piling into the car early in the morning Frank running up and down the sidelines with the team and knowing he had to hold commentary or Luca would be thrown out the rules of courtesies were strictly enforced every player was encouraged every team cheered on where else but on the Upper West Side. West Side etiquette tempered Frank's behavior he bit his tongue when

wanting to challenge the ref or the coach he needed desperately for Luca to shine somewhere still shaken from the experience in his pre-school.

Luca now in a school that more or less valued him veering often more toward tolerating though his level of energy still at issue heavy hearted at a neighborhood café was hit by a revelatory thunderbolt that Luca's energies and temperament were a perfect match for tennis his agility his *heart* his ability to focus and his zeal for competition made him a perfect candidate for the game of tennis. Frank introduced to the sport by Rebecca became a tennis junkie relishing the idea that his son become a tennis champ. After the usual word of mouth inquiries I found a coach who seemed just right ranking one hundred forty-five internationally had to quit because he wrecked his knees in a car accident and with a true apocalyptic vision decided to start a grass roots tennis team in Harlem bringing in neighborhood boys of eight training them to become tennis pros. Luca was now in the third grade having *Susie* the teacher who understood him perfectly and genuinely had affection for him.

Calling Coach PC *I have the perfect kid for you* I said introducing myself on the phone continued *he has great potential he can be a real tennis star* he laughs but listens *I know I sound like a Jewish momma but believe me I am the mother of a future formidable tennis star*. Coach PC agreed to pick up Luca at this third grade class at the end of a school day and I to pick him up at the Armory serving as tennis center in Harlem. Luca was being asked to go along with someone he never met to play a sport he didn't know more of except by watching his father and sister Rebecca hit tennis balls while on vacation in Wellfleet. Luca hid under Susie's desk refusing to move but somehow Coach PC forked Luca out with Susie's prodding and they went off. At six the designated time I arrived and heard *I will get you a soda but for the last time don't ever ask me again* and after giving Luca a coke handed him over and told me he would pick him up each day from school at 3pm and this he did for years to come. And thus began our journey into the world of tennis under the masterful tutelage of Coach PC who saw that spark in Luca and believed he could train this stallion into a real prize winner a true tennis pro.

Luca agreed to that last can of coke settled in and we became members of the extended family Coach PC's crew. Tennis became the centerpiece of our lives. The balance shifted in dramatic ways Frank relegated to a lesser male role in Luca's life he was no longer the central authority figure. Frank was as cowed by Coach PC as Luca was mesmerized. Here was the tennis champ taking Luca under his wing and promising to make him into one of the top ten or twenty-five tennis players in the world. Part of the script was that Luca at fifteen would leave school join the tour and that Coach PC would follow as manager, teacher and coach. The school was thrilled because every day at 3 Luca would be picked up by Coach PC and after a three hour work out including a three mile run would return the next day to school tempered. He became a minor celebrity men seemed to love athletes and men from the Upper West Side particularly smitten with a kid one promising to become a tennis pro. Interesting how tennis universally changed perceptions of Luca from a wild boy with excess energy hard to control or contain drawing now adulation near to hero worship when just nine.

It came time to say goodbye to Annie best with babies and toddlers and to hire a woman named Levett also from Jamaica. Levett had a college degree and ran off to New York to escape from the man who got her pregnant and for whom she had contempt speculated always that Levett had been a victim of rape. Levett's son eventually went back to live with family in Jamaica entering a good school playing violin but speaking little. Summers he joined Levett and came with Levett during summer weekdays. Levett became part of his very heart he trusted her as he never nor should have trusted either of us at that point I caught between henchman gun moll for a miserable man or turbulently pulling away. Luca and Levett were in perfect sympathy. Life was better for Luca he had Levett he had Coach PC. Food logs and food without any sugar became the standard for Coach PC's burgeoning tennis stars and in the second year Luca had to fill out weekly food logs on the honor system accounting for a sugar free wholesome diet. Coach PC knew by the levels of his energy when and how Luca cheated and consumed sugar but said little believing that Luca would adapt to a sugarless world as he succeeded as a tennis player striving to become a champ one of the top ten or twenty-five.

Frank Luca and I were by now seeing a psychologist to see how we could make a better family the psychologist was on the short side pudgy always on a diet with a toupee and strictly Jewish humor and colloquialisms. He shared he had two kids and was not averse to telling an anecdote or two about them who knew if they were lessons fables or somewhere near the truth. He thought having Luca prepare for a career in tennis was a terrific idea and knew the implications what it meant to Frank to have a tennis star for a son. Now with a strong male authority in our extended family namely Coach PC, Frank's cruel and abusive outbursts were tempered. Frank also feared being considered an abusive father in the eyes of the therapist thus gaining greater control of his anger at the same time he began disappearing from our lives emotionally physically and metaphorically.

So we moved from a frenzied pack of carnivorous parents with child to some semblance of order and calm no pills no daily behavior notes from school no sugar and a strict regimen of tennis and when Luca got home around 6, either Frank or I picking him up, often getting there a little earlier to watch with pride our budding prodigy. Once at home Luca would eat his meal do his homework if haphazardly and go to bed exhausted almost as silent as Levett's son Luke. In the third year of tennis Luca started playing in tennis tournaments and Coach PC asked that Luca drop out of baseball and soccer a decision critical for a single focus on tennis. Luca preparing for matches laid out his tennis outfit his thermos bottle and his special towel tucking in a smooth small stone to bring him good luck. Coach PC would abide no tennis products from Wilson, which he said had a history of supporting clubs that discriminated against black members and players. Frank dared not cross or second best Coach PC his fatherly ride to credibility rode on Coach's commitment to Luca's burgeoning tennis promise and career.

Religion and Luca became another unique and unpredictable venture. By birth Luca was Catholic you had to be in Paraguay whatever the indigenous rites and ceremonies. Contraception and abortion were strictly forbidden enforced as only a dictatorship wielding power. Additionally there was a shortage of adult men a fall off from border

wars men often having multiple mistresses. The informal world co-existed easily in Paraguay when a young woman had a baby she often gave it up knowing she could only successfully raise one child that being the case with Luca. Luca was by birth Catholic and by virtue of his adoptive mother Jewish. Thus we had a Catholic son who became a Jew never circumcised and when Frank brought it up with our German pediatrician she immediately shut down the possibility. Frank thought when they took showers together he would wonder why their penises looked so different and that as he grew up his sexual partners would want to know why he wasn't circumcised further there was evidence that uncircumcised males could transmit or be a causative factor for cervical cancer in their partners. *Too late to do this* said the doctor in her Germanic best and *if he feels strongly he can do it as an adult* case closed. Frank was looking for the perfect son for perfection only fitting for a perfect father figure his family would frequently comment as they watched Luca's physical prowess spirit and high energy *that guy he is all boy*. My mother and Luca's grandmother had to swallow hard even to give him an air brush kiss regarded him as obviously inferior not really Jewish further evidence about the miserable choices I had made about men in my life.

One of Luca's best friends from school was Hart his mother from the whitest mid-west heartland worked as a chef and caterer his father black a chef in the coast guard now cooking in a local sea food restaurant years older than his wife. Luca loved spending the night with the family its easiness if in tiny rent-controlled apartment if with direct Hudson River views. On weekends without a tennis tournament he would attend church services with Jane and Hart at St Paul's Chapel on the Columbia campus. The church was formed as a lay Catholic community tolerant to a fault originated by the war resisting and ultimately jailed Berrigan brothers both priests. Luca on his own negotiated with the church community to be christened a Catholic. On a particular Saturday Frank and I were interviewed by the Deacon prior to this estimable event Luca had been studying scripture with Jane and Hart and was fully cognizant of what he was choosing to do he was eight. I was asked to get him a white outfit one they looked a little Indian as from India and to contribute to the communal meal that would follow with the entire church community the date was set. I bought Luca such an outfit he refusing it insisted on shopping with me until he found white suit a white shirt a white satin tie and white shoes dressed he looked as if in a *Zoot Suit*.

We identified two godparents who had to be christened Catholic our gay former neighbor and as godmother an artist friend each standing on either side of Luca as they Christening proceeded. In attendance Frank's family awash with pride and approval and my Jewish mother and father teeth clenched daring not to object. In this lay community the members conducted most of the ceremony all but the homily for which they selected a Jesuit priest. This particular priest had written a novel about sex and intrigue in Rome and had been an extra in the movie *The Mission a major touchstone for Luca's identity*. Symmetry and serendipity of this kind must be heaven sent after Luca was dipped or sprinkled anointed he gave a hug to the priest and smiled maybe the biggest since he had left Paraguay. Lunch was served my mother in her inimitable *Zelig* fashion spoke about all of her various connections to Catholicism with Frank's family and anyone else who would listen and Luca looked content if a bit like a racketeer.

By way of anecdote, on one of our many rides back and forth from the Upper West Side to Riverdale along the Hudson Luca and Hart in the back seat about seven Luca asked Hart if he were abandoned at birth to which Hart responded *no Luca my mother doesn't have a driver's license* and later in the same conversation Luca said having been a close follower of politics as we listened to news riding up and down the Henry Hudson Parkway *Poor Monica Lewinsky* said Luca, *Why?* Asked Hart. *Because,* said Luca *she had President Clinton's dick in her mouth.* *Oh and ugh,* commented Hart, Luca already worrying about what would become of Monica Lewinsky. In another political moment again having heard on the radio on one of our commutes that the rain forest was being destroyed so that cows could graze and produce hamburger meat for the likes of Mac Donald's Luca asked when we got home to write a letter he dictated to President Clinton for whom he had an enormous affinity. *Dear President Clinton, Please tell them to stop cutting down trees in the rain forest to make hamburger meat. I come from a country with a bad government and I need you to tell them to stop and save the rain forest, Love, Luca.* One can only imagine the delight and laughter upon receiving this letter from a small boy in New York City by the staff and readers of mail. President Clinton wrote back thanking Luca for his letter and saying he would look into the situation.

I recount these stories to say that I a secular Jewish mother never had such a son and that *my heart runneth over* from the day I held his wizened body until it plumped out and whether watching him race back and forth on a tennis court still not understanding the scoring or in a chapel watching him become Christened I never for a moment regretted promising to be his mother if I always regretted marrying or even sleeping for the first time with his father.

We became a sugarless tennis player household rich in trophies. Never ceasing with longing for Manhattan startled yet again as the skyline drifted in and out of our side-view mirror Manhattan the great mediator tempering or pushing from mind a marriage like remaining sludge tumbling against the Hudson shoreline. There we were in our modest car with our burgeoning tennis champ barely exchanging a word no sideway glances fearing that any contact would explode in our faces vituperative and unforgiveable. Love a false premise an arrangement his ambition in exchange for my misguided desire to stay young and moist the marriage was dying like an atrophied limb. My face an ever-slackening canvas embedded with epithets hurled *I am on the way up and you down I am young and you are old* and transcribed in my words *your face is like fallen soufflé.* I was disintegrating the force of his words sped up my chronology his running commentary the architecture for our ruin. And as we sat on the sidelines at tennis matches sponsored by the Junior Tennis League Frank huddling with the men pointing out his son and I trying to figure out scoring throwing thumbs up to my son *thumbs up thumbs up.*

At the end of every match he would cry win or lose the expression of the deep emotion and intensity exerted playing the match. Frank would sit in the car returning to Riverdale a running sports commentary objective cool and dispassionate. We were stuck together this little family this burgeoning tennis pro this mother her face an unforgiving canvas and a father fanciful as Sabrina and Venus Williams' father about the life in the stands he

was going to have at tennis centers around the world. In time the mean-spirited words deflected from my face boomeranging as in *sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never harm me*. My body no longer craved his touch gave up longing the spring the elasticity back in my face I had a bounce in my step and laughter in my eyes I was youthful again. It took time for his relentless pursuit to diminish me to lose its verve he kept it up but I was no longer an enrapt and captivated audience.

Now dancing remembering at sixteen big band dancing with Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey getting close enough to feel the heat and stiffening of a penis to the slow somber beat. While married to Ben lots of twirling and spinning with anyone whom would twirl and spin with me Ben glancing over with a kind of pride as in property. I was his sexy woman stepping out in her own sensual choreography others looking on commenting *what a good dancer*. If Frank and I could hardly hold hands in movie theaters trying not to touch reaching for popcorn you could be assured we never danced together. At his sister's wedding second marriage all siblings marry multiple times there he was bride in hand as if a professional swing dancer on *American Bandstand* or if now *Dancing with the Stars*. I sat there next to Nana his grandmother aghast even as she continually pointed out all of the men who had been to *university* (federal prison) all named Joey and some food group or Joey *Four Eyes*, wore glasses. Nana watched her grandchildren dance with great pride and regaled me about how she and her husband the numbers racketeer would dress *up to the nines* and go dancing. She hadn't noticed my body stiffening so enamored of her high stepping dipping and fancy footed grandson and granddaughter.

I didn't know you could dance I said as we munched on wedding calamari and he with the sensitivity of a lobotomized and heavily drugged mental patient said *oh sure I love dancing*. Pestle and mortar crushing me to old wizened dried out a woman drained of any life force he claiming his place among the notables Bataille and Foucault and anyone else French. His family went from adulation for my medical referrals and me to threat and warning that Frankie he will *get too smart around all those smart people* and leave us with an empty chair on Sundays for pasta and gravy. I was emblematic of danger incarnate and he was as mad furious and mean-mouthed as my mother I wondering how I had fallen once more into the dragon's mouth once by birth and twice by marriage the lure the gulp filled with an irresistible magnetism. So at his sister's wedding I learned I was married to a divine swing dancer and I slipped even further away from myself the pain of recognition too great another defeat too much. How far this degradation and deceit could go as far as a dictatorship in Latin America and a found infant that we brought into our home the very word makes my head spin home.

To add a sardonic touch not only did I dive into the mouth of the cowardly and voracious lion I had as neighbors two men who sat on the Board of the Riverdale Coop who were responsible for my professional beheading who wiped me clean off the slate of the employed until a major intervention by the Chancellor but me back on payroll that story another time. While living in Riverdale I worked way downtown in the West Village where my energies and my strong sense of purpose were welcomed if I chose to live in this building where my neighbors were the henchmen the *Horsemen of the Apocalypse* never irony having greater punch or pause. Whenever I got home I would find Luca

looping around the apartment in a *power ranger* outfit he had one in each color. Luca when returning from school each day would throw off his clothes and become whatever super hero he fancied at the moment never did he move about the house in ordinary street clothes.

Having watched his mother prepare marinara sauce multiple times decided that I just didn't have the knack and prepared pasta with *Classico* sauce having gotten home earlier on a particular evening and it was as if the lion in whose cave I dwelled mounted a roar and desperate cry as if wounded or as in the fable getting a thorn stuck in a paw as in *Androcles and the Lion*, *how dare you call this marinara sauce? I told you to watch my mother and nana prepare the gravy I told you to apprentice yourself.* Cursing carrying he screamed out *I ban you I forbid you to ever make marinara again do you hear me?* He proceeded to storm out of the kitchen into *his room* slamming the door shut without eating. He had a *room of his own* a space within which to dream masturbate and writing his ongoing Foucault commentary. After this particular episode Luca hiding with Levett in her room off the kitchen burst in wild guffaws and giggles and when the *coast was clear* I joined in on the hilarity. A near convulsive with laughter trio came into the kitchen for a meal of pasta and *Classico* marinara sauce slurping noisily savoring the forsaken meal.

Clinging to the edge of the Queen size mattress we were a couple for whom just the suggestion of touch was scorching and dangerous the space on the bed not sufficiently wide to prevent the occasional and accidental brushing up against sleep moving the body with a mind of its with its own hungers propelling the motion. We each settled into intentionally separate lives with as little contact as possible except for car rides to tournaments and to Rhinebeck to see his family. Luca annexed affixed to our lives leaving us with the dilemma of our curious and false ways there was never a thought or whisper of living separately or even divorcing.

Our lives changed dramatically exponentially when we met a group of Brazilians who welcomed us as a family of *real New Yorkers* Frank recapturing his aura of authentic *Upper West Sider*. They had two boys one a year older and the other a year younger than Luca who had always believed in his heart that his birth father was Brazilian knowing that his village was but a short distance from the border of Brazil and so he fell into the fold as more sibling than friend. The two brothers went to Luca's public elementary school being nearly fluent in English from their education in elite circles and schools in Brazil. The family rented a sprawling apartment with a swimming pool on Broadway just above West 86th Street, which became a comfortable second home for each of us. The father a known and well-regarded Brazilian journalist who at great risk to his own safety and that of his family exposed the horrific information concerning the Brazilian police force and their strategic slaughtering of street children in and around state buildings who were characterized as a nuisance particularly to tourists and other respectable citizens. The series was reported worldwide and thus the invitation to become a fellow for a two year period at the Columbia school of journalism.

Ultimately the family invited us to participate expenses paid at a workshop for program for street youth in Salvador Bahia Brazil this becoming a pivotal experience in our lives. For me it affirmed in a stunning way that profound humility coupled with opportunities for enlightened choice the most excluded children could be transformational. The program met with children first on their own terms and in their own territory often sleeping next to them on the street building toward an invitation to virtually move inside if they would part with their street lives in exchange for schooling nutritious food full medical support and the chance to learn to be a circus performer a dancer a fashion designer in an orchestra and band or manage a paper recycling or other such burgeoning enterprises. Frank fell enamored obsessed with the women in Salvadoran all in well fitting outfits without concern for body shape or size who following a day of work danced in the open air bars through the night. Drunk with sexuality spoke to his devotion for the writings of Paulo Freire with whom this organization had collaborated to develop its philosophy of a *Pedagogy of Desire*.

Back in New York our family life found an antidote an open window ventilation relief from our suffocating and stultifying lives just being with the Brazilian family was tonic. This all a particularly happy occurrence for Luca who often seemed more joined to their family than to ours. Frank spending more and more of weekend and after work time at their apartment Luca going to be with them weekends after soccer games or tournaments he yet having to make a definitive sport's choice. Showing up at the end of my day for a quick glass of wine and a shared ride back to Riverdale. Frank and the journalist's wife although I learned in Brazil society people rarely legally marry shared a particular camaraderie more of desperation the wife watching as her husband brought in female students to his studio for extended afternoon or evening meetings. On either continent Frank became a regular Fred Astaire the man in the dancing *red shoes* the man who couldn't hold either his eyes or feet in place his newly acquired *Tropicalia* beat and visions of the sultry and sumptuous Bahia women. *I belong in Brazil* he commented in all earnestness after the first of our trips. He was a man of many persuasions and attributes a man *for all seasons* who could dance boy could he dance.

Dad how could you betray me you adopted me? And so began the avalanche all of the misdeeds the sins the lies the fault lines the wrongs so ensues the final onslaught the bitter end. Straight out of the exquisite suffering of an Italian opera or the buffoonery of *The Three Stooges* or *A Night at the Opera* or watching bumper cars we were thrust into our own horror show. *Whose Frank's girlfriend?* My daughter calls and asks giggling the kind with premonition ringing through her voice. *Sic your lawyer son on me will you?* Frank calls out caught pants virtually down caught in the headlamps lashing out taunting and frightened. *Never had these feelings never felt the scream of perfect union never arched never orgasmed as deeply never thought believed I would come to this experience,* she writes in Portuguese to all of her colleagues at the very same organization for street kids in Salvador with which by now we had established deep connections and friendships.

She was one of a myriad of educational consultants and a presenter at this annual a three-day conference designed to enhance the prestige and political profile of Projeto Axe with

the government. The executive committee ever mindful of public opinion needed to maintain favor with wealthy patrons for their work with street children promising an ultimate transformation of these children in positive directions with the implementation of the *Pedagogy of Desire*. The leaders of Projeto Axe were all sophisticated social activists many of whom had served time in prison during the time of the Brazilian dictatorship children's rights their cause. The executive team often referring to Lacan and Derrida as well as Paulo Freire when describing the inspiration for their essential philosophy and here almost a lapdog Frank describing himself as Foucault expert with a Ph.D. from Teachers College Columbia highly regarded in Brazil. Frank in several trips had never been to Salvador without me and now he was presenting a paper and serving on a panel. Back to Brazil to dance again through the night with and among the crowds dancing and placing his hands all over the scantily and shapely Brazilian women here he was scholar for a week interpreting the good word of Foucault. The professor who sat on his committee and guided his dissertation hearing about his coming presentation swallowed hard commenting to other faculty *my feral student whom we let get by a Foucault scholar in residence oh dear!* Frank sipping *Caipirinha* and dining on *feijoada* had other things in mind using Foucault as cover. Derivative as a thinker to be kind an interpreter of *Bataille* and *Marat Sade* a compiled identity without a wince extending himself to this female co-presenter as a lover without parallel did indeed send her up in smoke feverish with orgasm and howl. While back at home Luca and I continued our usual routines without tension or constraints.

Emails in Portuguese of the great event careened across continents as if announcing a birth and I imagine it was for her the birth of orgasm or of great and steamy orgasm or of celestial orgasm or down and dirty orgasm or bell weather orgasm a feminist triumph the freeing up of a woman's body seeming a little odd and misplaced in Brazil but again you can't always tell from watching the dancing. This sizzling correspondence went on behind our backs or without our knowledge I was the wife with the back turned on him on our queen-sized mattress that watched his little forays into disloyalty. And no condoms for Frank I later found out condoms are given out on every street corner in Salvador it is nearly impossible to have unprotected sex for fear of looking bad and reckless to the person with the handful reaching out. After trips I returned home stuffed with condoms, which I distributed at work as gifts.

Frank returned from Brazil to Riverdale as if nothing special happened the *great pretender* (*Freddie Mercury song*) spoke with erudition about his paper and his conversations and of the collegiality of the presenters. This trip was in late fall with Thanksgiving coming upon Frank mentioning off handedly that one of the *presenters* was coming staying at a hotel on the Upper West Side and that he would be showing her around meant *showing her off*. Furthermore she was interested in the kind of work he did and desirous of learning more about *progressive education* Bank Street College where he was an instructor being ground zero. He extended artfully a visit to the like-minded public school where Luca and the two Brazilian children were in attendance. His plan included moving out into wider concentric circles introducing her to our friends *our world* renowned poets artists academics and to his famous mentor at Teachers College the one who cringed when she thought of the loss of integrity she felt letting him get by.

Thanksgiving approached we would go to dinner at Frank's brother's house in Connecticut. On the Sunday preceding Thanksgiving we were invited to our Brazilian friends home for a ceremonial *feijoada* to welcome the said educator and friend from Rio. Frank would pick her up at the airport. Luca and I would meet there after his soccer game. As planned Luca and I walked in and there she was snug next to Frank who stood up awkwardly as we entered kissing me on both cheeks then introducing us to Monique who then also kissed me on both cheeks. Luca looked askance and raced into the boys' room already in the heat of violent video games. *He has been fucking her all afternoon* I thought to myself taking in the wild overheated *afterglow*. Soon after Luca signals for me to come into the boys' room *Mom that's Dad's girlfriend* he tells me he is only eight. Simpatico as if conjoined twins there we were Luca and I harbingers of the same awful knowledge. *As soon as we eat we will leave* I tell him.

It had been pre-arranged as in a scheduled elective surgery that I would take the car home and that he would follow later. Luca and the boys ate in their room the adults gathered around the table for the traditional Brazilian feast. Everyone at the table knew about Monique's orgasms of the breaking of the sound barrier the splitting asunder the electric rumble the humbling coupling. Not yet apprised of the sensational orgasm telling email but benumbed becoming quickly unreadable my expression fixed. The meal finished Luca and after a round of double cheeked kisses left. The very cool early dusk night air heard us heave and exhale *Mom that is daddy's girlfriend*, Luca tells me again. *Yes I know* I answer simply and directly and we get into the car and drive north up the Henry Hudson Parkway the lights and sky line dim as we reach the toll and then up sixty-three marble steps and home. Luca puts on his pajamas brushes his teeth I read a *Bernstein Bears* book that he loves and then singing my two night time songs *Home on the Range* and *Brahms Lullaby* gird myself and give an extra reassuring hug. Frank gets in about 2am slips into bed to his far corner I of still body and shallow breathing do not acknowledge his return morning comes and Luca and I rush into the car he for school and me for work.

Day after the festive *feijoada* Luca and I settled in our respective places school and work and around 11am I get a call from Luca's school *What is Frank doing here with his girlfriend? How do you know? Luca told me! This is not appropriate in an elementary school!* And with that she the principal hung up. Trying to catch my breath snap the tears back inside back into their ducts as if a turtle hiding went back to work. Later in the day although exhausted from working heavy hearted and weak kneed another call *how did you let Frank bring his girl friend to tennis practice? I do not want this here!* With that he hung up the coach of strict dietary regulations (no sugar, etc.) and rigid rules for participation with no room for negotiation. Gulped hard the clock was winding down and I walked toward my car. The chill in the Greenwich Village air pressed the tears against my cheeks I felt the trembling of a life-altering premonition. Sixty-three stairs a door to open and there I saw bare feet dangling over the edge of our prize black leather couch. Frank came rushing from the kitchen with apron on this a miracle when he never even did a dish *Hi* he said a little nervously lip twitching at the same time a body lifted off the couch the one attached to the bare feet it was the very same woman from the *feijoada* the special guest educator from Brazil. She walked toward me and kissed me on both cheeks

I turned rapidly away and went to *our* (soon to become a euphemism) room and closed the door. Luca was already in his room having been picked up from tennis Frank had rented a car to facilitate escorting Monique around. After wiping a tear or two and choking back sobs stepping from wildly mounting confusion I popped my head into Luca's room who said *Mommy do something that is Daddy's girl friend!* Soon after Frank came into *our* room closed the door saying sternly *how could you have been so rude to our guest just walking away like that not even a hello or any greeting?*

Without pause I said *taking your fucking girl friend out of this house you have five minutes to leave or I will call the police and be on notice I shall contact a divorce lawyer in the morning.* With that they scattered like fallen leaves pushed on by a leaf blower. Luca came out of his room after they left. We each had a good cry. I said to Daddy *how could you betray me like this when you adopted me? Should have added us in that question* I said. Frank made spaghetti the forbidden food the dish I was told never to make under threat I imagined he had learned to make this by osmosis by blood. Not to let it go to waste invited Luca to join me as we sat down to eat on trays and tray tables in front of the TV in the guest room, which also served as the TV room. Luca and I watched our favorite *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and laughed ourselves silly. Luca slept with me that night and many thereafter holding tightly onto each other's hands sleeping safely more in the middle of the bed.

The next day started with more *who is Frank's girl friend?* Rebecca had heard from the tennis coach or school principal or Luca's friend Adam's mother. I took Luca to school walked up with him to apologize to the principal who looked on me with the saddest eyes as if looking into the face of great misfortune. I knew they would be solicitous kind to Luca all day. When I got to work I called the tennis coach and apologized for intruding on his space with the illicit *he didn't care what went on in private life* he told me *but not here* and I knew he would be particularly sensitive to Luca on the court that day. And at work I wore a more than ever impenetrable my smile practiced over a lifetime unrevealing and blinding as in a warning *don't get too close don't challenge or probe.* I learned the art of being sanguine and unreadable early on even as a late teenager while I dreamed up ways to commit suicide wanting to die. The friends from Brazil invited Luca and me to dinner the next day and when we showed up they looked bereft and ashamed having in effect entrapped me in this still undeclared love tryst. They had known that Frank had been cheating and that Monique had reached the heavens and beyond orgasming as Frank plunged deeper and deeper into her soul. I told them not to worry and that I was sorry that they were brought into all of this. There will be a divorce at the end of this rainbow I told them simply and we ate. Luca and the boys played video games laughing more heartily than ever the boys conspiring.

Not quite the end after Monique returned to Brazil Frank moved to *his study* no formal papers yet just inquiries. He was all fussed up because every door he wanted to open was slammed shut or closed tight to him our friends stood in flank *he wants his cake and eat it at the same time* one male friend commented. *Don't want anything to do with anyone who hurts Naomi* another friend when he called. And his mentor from Teachers College had Monique in her living room with Frank served them lunch and then called me with

the kind of Jewish guilt that adheres and from which she never recovered. Frank then launched a campaign unbelievably to receive my blessings to go to Brazil during Christmas break and through New Years' Eve. Already clutching a ticket he lay fetal in his closet whimpering *I have to go I need to go I have no choice*. This magnificent obsession led to a boarding pass fleet foot from the apartment never looking back.

This to be a time of momentous personal upheaval a radical confluence of life altering events as Frank mounted the plane for Brazil my brother dismounted a plane from Texas. We were two huddling siblings making a Solomonic decision one in which we would either have our mother led out of the house in handcuffs and our father in a casket our mother already on the *New Jersey Registry for Elder Abuse* or have our father leave the home he loved and in which he wanted to die though not at her hand. Ultimately she remained in that house for a decade longer as the aggrieved much understood mother of two hostile forces her children. Quoting from a mythical *Talmud* my brother urged that we *honor* our mother by having her stay and have our father live as graciously as possible away from her venomous dangerous and life threatening wrath. We despised our mother as a mother if not as a person and would have gained a certain if twisted gratification to have her sentenced to life in an institution for the criminally insane and actually saw the annotated calendar on which our father wrote *Bluma wants me dead how sad how sad*. We had clear evidence that her name was entered on *The Registry* by professional staff at two different hospitals directly observing her mad desire to rid herself of him.

The better angels fluttered above and from deep within our father's well of wisdom and abiding love for his wife let us know the course to take. An Irish friend of mine steeped in Irish spirit and lore decided to open her home to three or four forgetful or Alzheimer seniors serving them elegant meals on china with crystal glassfuls of wine home made pies and song. After a very weepy call my brother standing over my shoulder I asked if she would take our father into our home and without hesitating said bring him then on December 31st. It was the day before and I went back to NYC and arranged for Luca to stay with our New York Brazilian friends promising to return by evening bringing all three boys back to Riverdale where we would have our own New Year's Eve celebration. Frank by now in Sao Paulo Brazil at his girlfriend's home in a *Rondelay* of fucking and me about to undertake what was the single most significant event in my life escorting our father to the place in which he would die far from the familiar. He holding my hand weakened smile comforting both my brother and me as the door closed finally our mother in the background wailing. We moved slowly bag packed his walker his diapers his medication and in my backpack photos representing different important times in his life and his recorder books entered the waiting limousine for the one hundred fifty mile drive. *The end is near* he told me as we drove off we held hands. How to describe what I was feeling a betraying no fucking good husband (not a word to my father) and the final uncovering of the killer she really was, our mother.

Arriving some three hours later my friend waited with a hug and for our father an Irish stew and warm apple pie. We unpacked all of his things in his room with a view to a winter garden vista. I sat with my father her three other guests all female regrettably having to get back to the City to pick up Luca and his two friends my dad knew I wasn't

going to be able to stay long. Before heading back my friend had arranged to have my dad visit with the hospice doctor assigned to us *he will not live through the week he is frail depressed frightened physically very compromised and heavily overmedicated his swollen tongue can hardly take in food or even liquid* he informed me. Stoically I listened searing pain rushed through me the kind of inner pain hard to withstand my father back at dinner with the other guests. Holding him in an embrace of desperation I walked out with my friend to the waiting car and driver *I will call you later in the evening and never hesitate to phone no matter the time of day or night and I will return within three or four days*. My brother and I had decided on a generous weekly stipend to cover his costs, which included twenty-four hour care. Using the car phone I shared with my brother what the hospice doctor said he sharing that our mother beat her head and body threatened to kill herself before falling into a deep and what seemed peaceful sleep.

I picked up the kids got my car and took off up the Hendry Hudson and up the sixty-three steps New Years Eve treats waited I had shopped before. I called Sheila who said *not to worry Naomi* with her Irish lilt. We were honorable siblings. The kids stuffed themselves with candy and ice cream made a lot of noise anticipating the New Year and fell asleep just before midnight each with bad tummy aches. As I sat celebrating one year becoming the next I took stock of my current circumstances my father close to dying in a stranger's home and my husband in Brazil mounting in a marathon fucking session with his *magnificent obsession*. My brother found a nurse's aid to take care of our mother during the very transition she had provoked and went back to Texas to be with his wife of just a few years. Predictably our mother fired the aid when she had been there less than twelve hours and launched a campaign to get her husband back believing money was being squandered on this endeavor and buying a new wardrobe in which to begin her life as an almost widow.

It wasn't until five days later that I was able to return to visit with my father needing to work out the cumbersome logistics of childcare no longer having a nanny. As I drove on the New York Thruway to Catskill New York I was preparing myself to spend time sitting beside my dying father although I had been in frequent contact with my friend who would share only that *things were going along*. Upon entering the open door I found my father dining on a festive meal sipping wine with the three other guests learning as things went along that my father no longer needed diapers no longer used a walker and no longer was taking any medicine. The hospice doctor in attendance found it all quite remarkable believed that he had been suffering from depression fearfulness and from large overdoses of medicines further that he was forgetful *Alzheimer's being very difficult to diagnose this more than likely age related dementia*. I gathered myself and joined everyone to dine. I knew that our Dad was gaining control over his life and his death away from his menacing if loved wife. This was the father I knew who lived with intentionality and optimism finding beauty in the simplest conversation with a waiter or pharmacist or neighbor and never wavering from divining the truth of things even when it led knowing that his wife to whom he had only been loyal and devoted had tried to kill him to end his life. Sharing the astounding news from the hospice doctor with my brother as I wept I said that no matter how we felt about our mother that our father really was in love with and had always loved her hard as that was to take in or believe our

father actually sacrificing his fatherly devotion to us. My brother recounted that he had said to our dad on his twenty-first birthday alone with him over a meal *how could you have done this to us leaving us at the hands of our mother* receiving only sad eyes and tightly pursed lips in return. My brother seven years my junior rarely spoke in the countervailing years they just slipped away unaccounted for.

With a very flexible work situation I was able to visit three times a week on weekends with Luca and often with Rebecca or my niece Rachel one of my brother's daughters. We would watch a Marx brother's video hand picked by Luca enjoy a sumptuous feast serenaded by Irish Celtic music from a chorus of family members or on a CD. Four months after my father took up residence he informed me on a weekend visit that he didn't want to sit with me listening to a Bach Cantata *that is was just too beautiful* and then simply stated that it was *time to go time for me to die* at which point he stopped eating taking frequent sucks on a wet sponge-like lollipop. On the fifth day my friend called said that it was time to come to her house to be with him. Despising myself and horrified I share knocking on the study door informing Frank that I would be gone overnight he shouted out a barrage of heated words about how I was abandoning him and that he couldn't take care of Luca if just for a night. Fortunately Luca waving goodbye didn't or pretended not to hear this exchange. I walked out knowing that we had stitched sadism and cruelty into our wedding vows that it was entrenched deep in our familial soil.

My generous and gracious friend sat with me at my father's side as his breathing became labored and he lapsed in and out of consciousness *we love you dad you are the best in us the best part of our lives I said over and over* as I rubbed his forehead and ran my fingers through his still generous head of silken white hair. Soon he was gone just to last final breaths on the very day that Frank and I had married a decade ago when he played the violin accompanied by his best friend Marian in the St. James Chapel at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Days later my brother joined me to spread our Dad's ashes at the side of another friend's pond in the Catskills. We gave the woman who took in our Dad a magnum of the finest Irish whiskey and left for New Jersey to plan for the memorial service to be held in three days time stopping first for hot fudge sundaes with all the trimmings. Trying to grapple over spoonfuls rich with whip cream and hot fudge that we would never see our father again and that he would become the stories we remembered or contrived and as time settled we would know really who he had been to us.

The memorial service without a Rabbi because he had been cremated was conducted by the grandchildren led off by my brother and concluded by one of my infamous reflections or poems a musician friend also a cantor then to a reception back at our mother's house. Guests and relatives noted following the service that no one mentioned or referred to our mother this in deference to the circumstance not widely circulated. She on the other hand was relieved saying to me as I left with my kids and my nieces to drive back to the City my brother and his wife leaving the next day *please naomi no poems at my funeral*. More than ten years later she lived to ninety-two I kept my word giving a rambling primarily superficial accounting of her which pleased the immediate family all in attendance they fearing as well what would come knowing the frightful history of our relationship if never spoken directly of.

Frank stayed in the apartment while he retained a divorce lawyer and looked for an apartment on the Upper West Side zip code 10025. He agreed to pay all of Luca's future college expenses to keep the word *Adulterer* out of the divorce decree choosing *Irreconcilable Differences* in the year 1998 of contested divorce there were only a scattershot of options available. Devious machinations of a disloyal father reckoned that this child of his would not go to college international tennis courts presenting the greater opportunity and sponsors alike. Unlike my last divorce when I left a house in tact to the last ashtray this time I wanted and took everything no desire to begin again from pit sand scratch this time no hammocks no bountiful geraniums. Life would continue the couch familiar freed of his and his mistresses' weighty dolorous presence filled again with extra firm foam. Busy selling the apartment sixty-three marble steps up while he at my request lay on a psychiatrist's couch assuaging guilt assigning blame. In this time frame my father died the apartment was sold Frank moved into his new coop a block from his teaching job squarely in the 10025 zip code. Luca and I moved in with our Brazilian friend who lived with us for a year while studying English at Columbia University. More roommates trying on our new status single mom and son we slept in one room in bunk beds Luca of course in the top bunk this while our new Coop on 5th Avenue and East 108th was being renovated new wood floors installed. This was a neighborhood still rankled with teen gang shot-offs. The building built in the '50's by HUD as a cooperative to stabilize the neighborhood resonant with no frills no molding proletarian architecture. Our apartment had no direct Central Park view was filled with 11th floor unobstructed light and sky had two bedrooms North/South cross ventilation and a bath and a half. Luca and I we landed on two feet.

Frank yet a mewling found in a basket on the steps of the Cathedral of St. John hunkered in a dark coop on West 111th Street just off Broadway. He and Monique played house as he scrambled to find an art studio for her or a job or to network with our old friends. Doors shut one after the other he was not the master of his own fate he had sucked off my life cipher poseur sycophant left hand-dogged bereft stripped of me standing bare-assed exposed. He was not born and bred on the Upper West Side inheritor of its grand tradition of fiery liberalism thorny intellectualism art in all of its manifestations neither was he a Jew a Jew who was not a Jew disparaging always but fully hankering. Monique was getting restless Frank desperate to secure a place for her in *his thin air world* if she was still howling at the moon with those stunning once-in-lifetime orgasms. On July 4th I stumbled upon Frank Monique and Luca on the banks of the Hudson River a picnic basket red-checkered cloth overflowing with delicacies from Zabar's wine from the local vintner and Luca his head contentedly on her lap. Heart stopping close to exhuming I waved came over wished them a *merrie fourth* moved on to watch the tall ships sailing down the Hudson commemorating the birth of our country. Immigrants all Frank Sicilian dirt beneath nails butcher apron asmeared with carcass blood Luca indigenous Guarini *Indian* from Paraguay Monique artist and educator from Rio de Janeiro. And me Jew from Eastern European nationalities switching names and allegiances as rainbows fade after summer storms the Holocaust as regular and searing as a calendar day. More immigrant than derivative feminist my feet stuck in the misery of flight and exile. My mother's agony and torment the heat on my neck her sculptor tools pleading forgiveness

marble renditions of a mother embracing a child produced over and over never a power tool in use.

The notary signed off on our legal documents attesting to the fact that Frank would take Luca that August to Brazil for three weeks to stay in Rio at Monique's house. Papers prepared for Luca's departure and re-entry to the States Luca had a U.S passport a Social Security Card and a New York State Health Certificate with no effort on Frank's part. The threesome left early in August I still in residence on the bottom bunk at our Brazilian friend's house. Pangs of awful anguish brought me back to the time when Jeremy and Rebecca went off skiing and visiting with old friends in the Swiss Alps soon after their father and I divorced this a bitter reprise. Luca recounts feeling, as is his way of being, a member of the family playing video games with Monique's two older sons and with Frank's urging playing in two tennis tournaments winning both promising to return with photographs speaking every few days by phone. Solitary figure consigned to long distance communication with my children vacationing in a plethora of wonderful foreign lands losing nerve veering to an ultimate and irrevocable despair.

Luca returned bursting with wondrous tales of his trip Monique returned but not for long finding nothing to do here but make love orgasms losing their edge she returned to Brazil. Frank in an attempt to save the relationship rushed off to Brazil seems Monique had lost her taste for his penetrating orgasms shut the door on him Frank coming home desultory and forlorn. Luca was sad about losing Monique I was sad about losing Monique and although she came into our home like the Vichy overwhelming France she believed that she would be subsumed into our lives Frank describing the circumstances much like that of his interpretive Mitterrand. I couldn't help but like and even value Monique knowing that when Luca was with her she enjoyed him and took good care of him. Asking occasionally our Brazilian friends about Monique they recount that she had a new man was painting and doing educational consulting had moved well-beyond Frank musing that she took her new capacity for sexual feats with her.

Frank's next woman a member in the local reform synagogue in which her parents were large contributors had a Coop in 10025 her father the owner of the well known *After Six* tuxedo rental business as well as a box at the Giants games. This woman a mother of a son exactly Luca's age was cold cunning and manipulative Frank fell into her life like a stray dog like the stray he was.

Luca and I moved into our new Fifth Avenue apartment Luca liked the new neighborhood being *in the hood*, and the easy cross town walk to Frank's or friends and school mates. Luca was in the 9th grade I volunteered to be the designated parent to take upwards of twenty students to R rated movies learning grudgingly that I also had to stay to watch the movie. Luca began a routine of requisite early morning tennis training the next step or level of his tennis ascendancy. We were on the court ready for practice by 6am each school day and at school before the late bell this for nearly two years. Luca flourished adhering to schedule and discipline if maybe cheating a little on the food logs handed in each Friday. Tournaments were a regular part of our weekends and he carried a little shiny stone amulet with him preparing each time exactly what to wear what towel

to bring and which water bottle. Frank and I sat in uneasy alliance as if bundle board between while Luca was making it through all of the preliminary eliminations. Luca won enough tournaments to be ranked number eight for the tri-state area for boys sixteen when he was just thirteen this by the Junior Tennis Association. Luca had a following including girls from his new high school who came holding up signs cheer-leader style not exactly protocol for tennis matches where one politely just claps. Luca was emerging as an exciting tennis pro until the bottom fell out on the very day he was to lead his high school team as captain if a freshman onto the court instead he was rigged and affixed to intravenous drips stuffed with pain pills in a room high above the East River on the pediatric floor of New York University Hospital. The tale recounted from journal notes and recollection in the section called Loss.

The final word:

Christmas 1998

Naomi,

I dealt you a set of public humiliations. And I think, Luca, too...I did and, then, I wanted to, desire you and, I know, how I expressed this did turn sour, at times. I tried to tell you about me –my age, my age in relation to your age, my needs, my desires, my deep need to be a good father. All of this having to do with Naomi as lover and as parent in relation to Frank. You became withholding, principled, more certain about who you were/are. (State of Israel raises its head here – history repeating itself pity for me). The clarity of analysis you brought to our lives became a fortress I believe you hid behind – and sometimes, a weapon. You reduced me to crass urges. How could you? I was trying – perhaps, stupidly, naively, and yes, with a reservoir of festering anger at myself and at you to get free of being mothered and managed.” Frank

Coincidentally he went to the same psychoanalyst as his academic mentor and my friend who told me over dinner one night, *you are a very good mother, Dr. G. said so, Frank told him that...*Material here for a *New Yorker* cartoonist or *drawings* as they are called.

Ugly repugnant revenge caricatures no justice can't avenge rearrange the past only give it a new hue sheen this narrative is caught Choctaw in the throat of a woman finger pointing for life that went so terribly awry. If Frank sounds hateful I sound pathetic filled with bathos **sorrow and pity* pitiful. *(Marcel Ophüls) The images are caste epitaphs headstones scripture words drilled down not to be rubbed out or removed. It stands. It is sad. It is sickening. This life as I saw it.

LOSS
2003

Naomi Barber

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Prelude to the rest of the story:

A decade later finds Luca and me still on Upper East Side. We had a rescued Chocolate Lab Pete for almost eleven years had to *put him down* hip dysplasia he couldn't hold himself up on his hind legs. That was a very hard day for Luca and me we were with him at the Humane Society as he drew his last breaths. We live, Luca and I, in a loose alliance he comes and goes sleeps rarely extended hospital stays ruin the distinction between night and day. His drive for a social life is fierce reminiscent of the inner force he demonstrated during his days playing tennis. Girls flock him as if a magnet or aphrodisiac they seem to accept his body modified with an ostomy bag hard to hide or keep hidden. I make sure ample medical supplies are on hand. The rhythm of our lives suits us. We essentially each live and eat in our own rooms sharing a kitchen and living room. We interact less but I am often heard past midnights calling for quiet and warning him to be quiet as well in the hallways and lobby intolerant neighbors have complained. This is New York *a city that never sleeps* even if they some neighbors do not act like real New Yorkers.

I am single have not met or wanted to meet another man. At seventy I announced a new identity that of writer and grandma settling into a pattern of writing mornings getting up by 6 am seeking adventure in the afternoons carving out sections of the City to make my own. I take care by choice of my grandson not quite two one day a week and sit with the kids on Sundays so that my daughter and her husband can have a romantic brunch or take in a movie. I do not work although not formally retired and have rarely been this happy.

Frank is on to his fourth or fifth consecutive girlfriend this one from Argentina no more New York Jews. He pays for health insurance for Luca and Luca stays at his apartment designated a *free place* whenever Frank is away these days to Argentina.

I have never regretted adopting Luca but regret marrying Frank each and every day if fleetingly. I try to catch the sunrise if just by hues in the sky and find rainbows in the kitchen reflected by the crystal chandelier tier I have had since my first foray into independent life after the first divorce. Life is good. I have evolved. No time to out-think or undo decisions and choices or to have retakes or do over's. As my therapist said as I was working through ending my first marriage *why not try to know as much of yourself as possible it will only die undisclosed with you*. This not as easy as she made it seem and who ever knows what information that gets revealed or dredged up is the whole the entire story what has been left out impossible to know or reclaim or rediscover? To be taken on faith that what I am learning is what I need or can know.

One year ago Luca wasn't 18 and one year ago a cardiologist unbeknownst to us came rushing into the operating room with a wire to shock Luca's heart as it stopped beating during the surgery. This time to place the bag ostomy and connection back on his tummy so that he poop could run out like weeping spring thaws down jagged snag toothed hard edged rock inclines – so Luca's poop would run again outside his body sliding down his tummy into a plastic bag – an accoutrement that can be nothing short of revolting – except if that is what is keeping you alive.

One year ago in February and March and April and May a child lay vanishing on a bed with multiple pillows turned toward the wall with the TV like an art installation that could not stop or be stopped his knees almost to his hollowed out eyes – the ribs like little scraped chicken bones sticking out – out of his tummy seeping poop like sewage that got backed up – the levy not holding things together inside – the route was broken tummy slide channeled most of what was excrement if any got made from the little he ate – and the pain was excruciating unceasing screeching burning terrorizing – he stuffed salves to plug up seep – and weekly we went to the doctor who would click his tongue and shake his head and recommend an MRI or a CAT SCAN – to which Luca shook his small face on his trebly neck thin as a tendril thin as a branch on a new tree – and we would leave and he would retreat to his bed curved like a cat tail to nose.

But there were frequent baths – just out of **Marat Sade* (The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul **Marat** as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de **Sade**) in and out of the bath with the water running like falls, like spring thaw – and he would sit there – that stream that trickle of poop falling like leaves off a tree into a pond plop.

We've been over this before this other terrestrial landscape – but today, today at 7 am I got a call “guess where I am? In the Hamptons, there are 60 of us here – we are going to have breakfast and go to the beach.” “Got sunscreen?” I asked. This was the morning after the senior prom which was on Fulton Street in the city – he sounded like any American boy the morning after that universal American event the senior prom – only he dropped out of high school in his senior year after trying in the fall – too closed in – and he is on the street most of the time – doing who knows what and smoking a lot of pot – and with people who will rat him out when the cops come – that has already happened – Monday he goes to be “interviewed” by the cops as a witness someone gave his name – my heart seizes with fear I have told him if he got into that kind of trouble it would kill me and it would – maybe not a bad thing – how much can anyone witness of the harsh and brutal and death defying in life?

Will he keep the bag, will he go to jail, will he finish school, will he return to Amsterdam where he felt at home?

It is Sunday July 6th 2006 and the landmark in my life is that I am no longer afraid of Sundays and no longer need to fill them up with someone anyone to pretend with and who will further plunder my life. I broke my own sound barrier. I love Sundays they are my blank page.

Naomi Barber
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As you may know, an incurable illness like this is a lot like war. There are moments of panic and anxiety, separated by hours of tedium. Scott Simon, Goodbyes and Greif in Real Time, Host of Weekend Edition Saturday on NPR

Nearly dying, having a life and death struggle means what? Aren't we to live as if we are? A self-proclaimed existentialist I chose to act as if I was always *near* death. I embraced the idea that we should love our death that *death is the mother of beauty* (Wallace Stevens) that we ought to begin each day with our death and believe that there is just blank beyond death. That was before I watched with astonishment and horror the hungry mouth the remorseless fist of death circle my son, *our* son, Luca wasting away resisting fighting off death with grit command persistence and composure the confrontation real the struggle to stay alive fierce. My amorousness my embracing of death never was followed by a ferocious greedy clamoring after being alive a steady glimmering sense of aliveness. Philosophy and hard core reality never got tangled up entangled. I was a soft existentialist the right aspirations the right ideas and a lot of empty obeisance.

State side against the cold metal bed rail fragments of poems float up deep purple lilies sharp petals props from which to bear witness. I mother pitched suddenly into the depth

of the role that defies definition and is imagination's upheaval. Death encircling my son, my Luca, wild pirouetting galvanized Matisse dancers as I sat riveted and beyond silent death grabbing with taunting surety and command unceasingly with an elegant sense of propriety authority and tyranny. Only an occasional poet rises to challenge and comprehend and lift words for death from pale contrition. Only life craving to be alive is the staff to ward off the shutting down of light ***do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*** (*Dylan Thomas) Poetry appears like an impenetrable skin a leaping up of courage to face grapple with swirling death a moat a leavening of space a distance growing and spreading between a mother's hand and her child's all knuckle tightening urgent fist. Lines fragments of bold neon shapes meld as if by Bruce Naumann asserting themselves against the savage struggle the fight the desire the appetite for life to be alive to stay alive. And if in the end it had ended and Luca succumbed I would have seen through a fearless veil of maternal will and might. Luca my child thrust into a completely pure unapologetic bare and unencumbered white-knuckled fight to stay alive to *rage against the dying of the light*.

Salvaged to make some meaning the stinking sinking hand of death warded off I live in golden moments no more half steps, half-truths no more waiting. I see clearly how I to be to live defiantly alive. Luca won. He stared death down and I watched but need watch no more. Not now no longer wanting to be broken by choices made not wanting to re-broker bad decisions. I know this is the day of poetry flowers clouds looking at them halfway or impatiently is to squander sight. My heartbeat fumbles its machinery is wearing down. Baby aspirins *enteric*-coated not to disrupt my digestive system are popped like M& M's. I seem to be the least frightened version of myself the least placating and the most clear about priorities. Now I rank love first. Luca is in love and it was love I now see that brought him through this dangling near final darkness. He fought to make his way back to love his love. Now I stand-down for love and to give him the space and room to love with a mother's vigilance I guard his right to have love and muse how strangely love revealed itself to me it was after all true that *death that is the mother of beauty*.

At First Sighting At First Diagnosis

We sat flanking our son, Luca, as he tangled with searing and violent physical sensations defying naming the *ulcerative colitis* having mounted and infiltrated his body with a vengeance. The Internet the new medical salvo of the undiscerning made us repositories of information adding a tincture of the folk and frightening. Hair splitting probabilities hyperbolic and wildly over inflated to the lay track percentages of people with *ulcerative colitis* who get *colon cancer* the quickest acting and most fatal of all cancers. As five-year-olds are unable to decipher the real from the magical so were we ill equipped to rear up prophetically doubting profligates to challenge. A layman parent fist filled with the toxicity of this brute force blood curdling information hamstrung and prostrate at the feet of the medical professionals. A mommy and a daddy whimpering like abandoned lap dogs drooling with the kind of total abandon and obeisance given at the foot of doctors before insurance reduced them liked skimmed gravy or to clergy before pedophilia stuffed their insteps with the crunch of menace. We signed off on anything they, the

doctors and hospital, wanted to do as they informed us according to protocol and to ward off liability and lawsuits. They needed our *informed consent* (a legal term) on all of the rafters of notes piling like uncollected trash of the pitfalls as well as the promise the aftershocks as well as the miracle in the ongoing like the *Battle of Bataan* treatment of Luca. Anything, anything and who could understand they might as well have been speaking to us in *Magyar* and we understanding it foreign tongues crash our ears so filled with the static of fear we were primed to do anything sign anything that held the promise to abate destroy hold the enemy at bay from encroaching death.

As if waiting out death were not enough there we were *enemy combatants* joined in this *watch*. Although I have no desire to temper his, Luca's father and my very ex-husband, or elevate my dread sorrow and pain at our son's bedside, I need to speak to blurt out and perhaps taint the purity of our child's physical suffering to add an uncanny dimension to all of this unfathomable and unthinkable turn of events. In this *still* I am arriving at the hospital at 6 am in our shared *Dodge Spirit* and spot him holding a plastic shopping bag which he is wont to *shlep* from home to home nomadic and uncommitted somehow the *West Side Market* plastic bag keeps him fixed in uncertainty a comfortable space for him. He had forgotten his glasses, which lay against the windshield, when he handed over the car to me to assume his overnight shift at Luca's bedside. He stood there bag in hand ranting about having to wait five extra minutes and that I never listened to phone messages otherwise I would have known that he left and needed his glasses and would have, what? A chill set me spinning as he words crawled beneath my skin how is it that I still quickened with rage and self-mortification when being dressed down remonstrated by him? Does not *time heal all wounds*? Adulterer man who brought a woman with whom he slept into our home and named her colleague and friend man who was so dunked like a *Stella D'oro Anisette Sponge* in the well of sex Luca and I had to back away from being overwhelmed by the stench of his deceits. This man stood curb side in the circular drive way of a New York City hospital yelling at me for not listening to my phone messages when I arrived home from a thirty-six hour stint at our son's bedside and not to know to come back seventy or more city streets to bring him his glasses. I marveled at how unsettled I became how unresolved how filled with hate and far from forgiving him I was.

This lapsed Catholic altar boy fell easily into confessionals and apologies. His new high priest was a psychiatrist I found for him and about whom he declared was a *great, great man! Dr. So and So* must have instigated periodic apologies as a necessary and critical step in the *forgiveness of self*-phase of therapy. (As a quick aside, I had a friend who at every party she attended stole something and when finally confronting her errant ways at the direction of her psychiatrist met with everyone from whom she stole to admit her wrong doing and to ask for forgiveness although she never gave back any of the items she stole.) Finding him in a closet whimpering while holding onto a round trip ticket to Brazil right after his girl friend left oh the turmoil of cheating getting caught and the inevitable intransigence of doing exactly what one planned left me no alternative but to get a divorce lawyer and extract a promise that upon his return he'd see a psychiatrist. My benevolence was self-serving knowing that I once again would be sharing a child with an ex-husband I would inevitably hate. Needing not to hate myself as well, I learned

through my own therapy during the first divorce that it was necessary that both adults be more or less whole in order not to sacrifice the children on a cross of contempt and revenge.

Perhaps it was after every good time in bed he had with his other women that tears would flow about his *loss* and the anguish he felt about the harm and hurt he had done to both Luca and me. This blubbery spilling over eyes and stammering *I'm sorry* further inflamed rather than comforted. ***I can't use another sorry, next time, you should admit, you're mean/low-down/trifling/ & no count straight out...*** (*Ntozake Shange). Lurking behind the *I'm sorry* just below the supplications like a jack-in-the-box out would fly the recriminations and the penultimate scolding where finger jutting leeward he would shout that it *was I* who drove him to *it*. Remembering his disheveled quixotic moods and mindsets this day I defiantly spun off leaving him to dangle mid-sentence. I felt the sudden wild urge that to be with *our* son I wanted it to be *my son* and not have to even share such a signifying pronoun with him. Luca, Luca throbbing with fierce resolve to stay alive while he dwindled in plain sight.

I don't feel safe with him. Luca told me when I suggested after having stayed with him pretty much around the clock for about three weeks that his father and I alternate nights in the hospital. I don't feel safe with him I quickened with dread at the implications and meaning of what he was saying. Stunned but not surprised, pleased as with solipsistic vindication, I was thrown back to grappling with that perplexing and ominous expression, feeling safe. What does it mean to feel safe with someone? The one place a child should feel safe was with a parent. My own childhood was in perpetual motion seeking safety. I was always scrambling to find dread free zones as the eruption of vitriol the hot lava of her, my mother's mad manipulations, would come rushing a tsunami out toward me. Without exaggeration I spent a childhood terrified and weeping as I ran for cover. And with my own mental health in the balance from that deep place within which we cradle our antecedents the weight of our ancestry I had to be and provide that safe place for my children as their mother. The razor's glint blood overrunning and running over the grid of veins on my wrists slashed and winnowing, emptying at the mere thought that I wasn't that unequivocal safe and nurturing place for my children.

**Sins to the third generation* there we were generationally on track. (You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, *Exodus 20:5*) True my first children never felt safe with their father and now Luca. What was it about me that picked unsafe men, men to feel unsafe with as fathers for my children? Was it the contrast of my goodness to their badness that I needed to keep me viable if unspeakably pathetic and horrible? Ensnared in the god cloth of our father kept me monkey *blind deaf and dumb* when it came to men.

Do you feel comfortable enough to share that with your father? I asked our inexplicably suffering child. I who still could not tell my own mother how from the moment we separated bodies into distinct beings that I had to flee from her was asking this of our child. Interestingly Craig my son-in-law and Rebecca's husband was deemed safe enough

by Luca to relieve me on those nights I wanted to go home to shower, change clothes be with Pete the dog and sleep. Our hundred pound rescued Chocolate Lab, Pete Sampras, was being cared for primarily by a neighbor who hearing about Luca offered to help out help and kind people often come forward at those necessary moments I knew.

I don't want you to stay I don't feel safe with you, Dad. He said. Bewildered and pained Frank bequeathed his night vigil to Craig. Emergency sessions with his psychiatrist and he was back insinuating himself ingratiating himself and to his credit not backing off. Soon the night was his. Aside from it being unthinkable to leave a sick child overnight in a hospital, pediatric units practically expects you to be there and threaten to report parents who are not around at the bewitching hour. Even as the wanted one, the parent of choice, the woman in me felt like dying over and over again as I sat near this man in the hospital each day. The woman in me was beyond placating or appeasement, the rage and hurt simply would not abate. The mother in me draws up from deep within the right thing to do I have learned to trust this mother, me. Children have been my life, my lifeline and my doom. I never have found a way to love a child and have a man all at the same time. Sadly, love and motherhood are for me incompatible.

Work within a finely delineated tightly circumspect scope held to course. *Leave the world a better place*, my musician father a non-Jew Jew with a Calvinist bent would often say. Making urban public schools better for the children in New York City was the way I positioned my work and appeased my inclination toward indignant warrior and resistant rebel. Peering into the rabbit hole of my ambition while still a hopeful nineteen-year-old I wanted to write poetry play the cello live abroad and have many lovers linking desires minus the cello with an out-patient of Riggs (a fashionable mental institution) a woman in plunging V-necks finely tailored pencil skirts and endlessly blood red perfectly manicured nails sharing the same boarding house on Irving Street in Cambridge across from the house where William James had lived. Drifting dangerously off course I hung onto the lyric of a woman who was a mad incarnation of a French courtesan dreaming of the salon into which she would step where Proust and Degas would still be. Wild fluctuations between dreams and an appalling lack of self-knowledge led me to trying on identities like dresses off the rack at Loehmann's the electricity of self-concealment clung to me. Timelessness a sense of floating in the infinite and the permeability of decisions dogged me and left me to squander free will and choice.

Fixed in a web of self-contempt putty in the hands of a mother who selected and swapped identities for me hoarding ants in pod piles of manure in an unkempt cow shed and a father who longed for me to be child-wife supplicant stand-in for his ranting self-flagellating wife. My mother regularly whipping herself into frenzy a crazy displacement of sexuality and wild unnamable ambition she must have had a mad inexorable sex drive by which she was repulsed, *that's disgusting*, she once said answering some mild tentative formulating question about reproduction. Here a swooning wife with tight-lipped austere Jew Calvinist husband who stifled his art and musicianship his sexuality and his velvet coveting warm eyes to lift her from self-inflicted suffering. He was stuck to abating and relieving her misery her contrivance while my brother, seven years younger and I, sat transfixed captive hostage to their wacky ritualized love-dance. It's not

by accident that this small squall of a family led to a daughter who now sat across from a second ex-husband for whom she had justifiable contempt a second husband whose manifest cruelty was acting as if she didn't really exist when in fact she really didn't. Such disfiguring personal history dangled me panting dog after forever-elusive true love. I was still innocent and puffy with longing when I reached him at forty-one hoping for romance handholding in movies smooching in bars dancing and soapy showers together. Feet affixed to the thick bristly hemp the welcome mat of endings our boy in death's throes somewhere nearby. I never did get showers together, never got soaped-up, never held hands in the movies, never ever smooched in bars, and didn't know he could dance until I saw him swing as if on *American Bandstand* with his sister at a wedding.

The near past recollected. It isn't any wonder that I am fixed in the region of the inconsolable the impotent and for whom hope for a smooching soap lathering love to come is improbable and wishing for it as absurd and mad as was my boarding house mate back on Irving Street ruminating about being the saucy seductress in a by-gone French salon. Having yet to marry to cross to the brutal tidal waters of regret while love was still fresh and blooming I also tried to become a Navajo Indian bride living in a Hogan near Canyon De Chelly with a Navajo Indian and tribal rodeo star Patrick. In one of my futile attempts to escape my manifest destiny traveled to the southwest to offer love and friendship to the Navajos as I confided to the chief of the tribe madness trickled my dogged feet that more often than not dangled in the cold relentless waters of suicide. Traipsing out to feel wonder possibility to have a heart quicken at the sight of beauty wandering off the beaten path has kept me alive if stuck and scurrying relentlessly back to slack mortality and failed choice. I was onto something when the road led to poetry cello and multiple lovers or Navajo rodeo stars I was more in synch more on track the roulette table the squalor of a troubled childhood out of which I could never go left me to the unforgiving arms of the mundane the ordinary the derivative doomed prophesies of broken sadomasochistic marriages.

Marching to the beat of a Calvinist drum I gathered good deeds for striving to achieve equity and social justice for New York public school kids while holding onto my integrity. Lying not so low in the subterranean an urgent bent never to tangle with the power struggles of the openly ambitious finding no tolerance to stay the course and rival individuals willing to do anything to survive. The deep fumes of manipulation and cunning the past heating whiffs of my mother and a penchant for flight my dancing feet would strike up and put me on the run to the comfortable folds of righteousness. I slunk off to flight sadly and so well and there I stayed kept from all possibility for either meaningful work or true love. I learned that staying hidden precludes the advent of such truly good things. Mired in confusion frozen fixed to an unwitting destiny love and work the two necessities of privilege and wellbeing according to that standard-bearer Freud eluded me were flung like bad clay into a shapeless amorphous tyranny.

Today my ex-husbands dropped like egg whites into ready-mix cake batter read the Sunday Times hands lazily but fastidiously intentionally lollygag along the curve of a naked female torso their bodies fit as if in a mold against the sheets. Oh how my lives go on without me! *You can never put back a broken family* my first husband warned as I

walked out with a cat lick grin of invincibility and nine lives more than twenty-four years ago but I was Humpty Dumpty and have really never gotten put back together again.

Fallen into a prophesy the despair and sorrow of yesterday today and tomorrow (k.d.Laing)
the bed in which I lie *you makes your bed and you sleep in it* or so the saying goes cuts deep into the grind and gristle of every day life with me.

Self-pity crops up heartburn after taste of the undigested. Further from someone who saw herself as invisible as well as invincible I am on the *no hire hit list* in the world of public school reform either wildly controversial or just discarded like old news but there I am on the cutting room floor. The self-righteousness I mimicked in my father went sour crumbling unfired clay my artifice of goodness and purity knocking me into the fray a fool trying to skip around the same maypole of power as the cunning the manipulative and the narcissistic. With faulty steps and self-deceit I locked myself out of earning a living self-preservation left me nearly penniless unable to confront my desire for survival and power. Unable to convert myself into being like everyone else kept me a steadfast mate of escapes the harshness of reaping the seeds which I sewed now devour me despair's sad step-sister. Tossed out removed excised eliminated from the orbit of the working world my running shoes now a perfect fit. Heartbreak and anguish and the very words: us, our, we, double bed, anniversary, school reform send me scurrying a fleeing rat to the certain sanctuary of the word suicide. I have long-time been death's bride.

Scuttling thoughts drifting aloft in a dying son's hospital room. Love eluded me. Love excluded me. Love trashed me. Exuding self-pity and self-loathing suffocating choking on revelations that pop up in quick flashbacks snapshots insights incisor teeth of the past chewing me up. It is nothing surprising that I should be sitting across from my sworn enemy the father of our dying almost dying nearly dying death enthralled found son. To know or think your child is dying is to think or know nothing the nothing of blank the nothing of nothingness. It is beyond fathoming beyond comprehension beyond the rightful order of things mine are the ashes to fling to the four winds spilling out of his hands not the other way around.

Nearing a June midnight Luca and I were moved through the streets uptown in an ambulance without siren from one hospital to another. Delivered from whom to whom and why we were not sure too numb and too scared to ask we traveled listening to Luca's favorite radio station they asked. Mere hours later we chased the gurney down the long chilly hospital corridor on the way to the emergency room surgery pints of blood having just been transfused into our limp feverish nearly dead child. Some quick pencil sketch by a surgical resident forewarned us that Luca's colon was to be removed within hours. Luca had me summon all the people whom he the dying child named to wait out the wait and to say goodbye and to be with him and to wish him well: an older sister and brother and their partners, his teacher, Phil from the sixth and eighth grades, his best friend Adam and Adam's father Dan. Mythically afraid of looking back we a band of the anointed trekked into the designated surgical waiting space to come and go or stay huddled to wait out the endless hours just like in the movies for the surgeon's call.

Ever in command with laser clarity if with a body more bones than flesh more pain than sustenance Luca also listed exactly who should see him in the minutes immediately following the surgery in the sterile inhospitable adult intensive care unit his surgeon generally treated only adults and had more confidence in Luca being moved there. Lying like a petal of an opening peony in the adult intensive care unit still under the relentless pull of anesthesia he wanted an accounting of who exactly came and was there and saw him post surgery. Recounting as instructed we were not to touch you but Adam tweaked your toe saying *good work buddy* and teacher Phil brushed his palm near your heart to sense its beat.

Back in time sitting in that zone where the real collides with the unthinkable a team of masked physicians we had barely just met were hovering over our son pulling his slippery porous colon out of his body starting the process of saving his life. Flanked by my grown children with great discomfort Frank's ex-stepchildren and noting his lonely petrified unguarded demeanor I suggested not out of munificence but at the possible death of a common child that he call his current girl friend and his brother to sit with him waiting out the call from the surgeon. And then as a true product of the '50's fixed in a supplicating female cultural imperative I handed the phone over to his grabbing male hand when the surgeon called many lives later he would be the first to hear directly from the *horse's mouth* the status of things.

You are always standing in front of me he would forever whine niggling about the placing of my feet impossible I was eight years older missed the '60's by a decade and did not have it within my purview to stand in front of any man. All along the arid road no dancing no soapy baths he was building a case writing exacting squeezing out the last final sentences for his exit he needed to be within a woman who knew how to scent the room with roses and have a man be a man. He was after all a *good man* or so he repeatedly told me what hilarious irony I such a good girl with such a good man co-dependent equals the masks of comedy do deceive so flagrantly. The phone in his hand the rage the sorrow the self-pity flared the petals of death pushed up through still wintry soil stifling a piercing wail I waited to hear was there still a son for us to tend to and to share? The lines blur trying not to confuse the story of a grave illness of a child's struggle with death and the heart's belligerence. Wanting to appease a fierce unrelenting need for vengeance after all was it not *Medea* who killed her two children to dangle their lifeless bodies in the face of their father and her faithless husband? Rationality at times gets overshadowed choices freely made so ill conceived nip at consciousness holding on hoarding feelings of betrayal and the heart's unremitting pain.

There are fifty ways to leave your lover (Paul Simon) as the song goes and there are fifty million ways to talk about and think about being left a terrible invasive beetle gnawing a tree losing viability why, why, why and why niggling is he the father of my child how could I have thought of him as a husband how could it be? The thrombosis of memory of revisionist personal history crippling looking across the expanse of a room as a child lay dying I see him who harmed me each day with lacerating words particularizing me out of existence out of the pronoun I and who stomped on my heart as he walked out hand-in-hand with his Brazilian lover. Wallowing in the same overused overgrown disbelief still

flogging what a freak of nature what disastrous misjudgment brought us to being the parents to the same child, his mother and father astounding amazing heart rendering heart breaking unequivocal unredeemable irrevocable.

Loss. Loss of an organ loss of a family loss of a marriage loss of an apartment loss of the familiar loss of the unquestioned loss of that which is not supposed to be lost. Loss. Loss of the superficial of inclinations at half-truths embellished narratives. Loss. Loss of the negligible loss of the ill-conceived loss of the quixotic loss of impatience loss of the unrevealed loss of time loss of thinking there is forever loss of being young and beautiful and waiting for love loss of fear that I am a bad mother loss of hating mine loss of a certain kind of vintage hopefulness the illusory a wait for real life to begin. Loss like death can be the mother of beauty. Loss no more hiding from the snapping mouth of sorrow the revealed past etched into a day without blinders or rose colored glasses. Loss of time to look for beauty. Loss of contrived desire for innocence.

What is left and not lost is a found intrepid gaze a laser trembling probe deep inside *why not look deep inside it is to your own life* my therapist of years ago once wondered, I look now. Death moments from a brutal snatching of my child its whiff its tremolo its ear searing pitch a flame lick spitting rumbling a force from deep in the bowels of what shapes our lives. I saw death up this close as I glimpsed into my child's face. Life is not a thing waiting to be lived when the circumstances are right wrapped like glaze in this self-admonishing homily something I always knew in my head kicked me at the knee bend. No more turning away from the rubble heap of misguided choices and decisions now extant in the bedrock of time and made by a ridiculously and absurdly uninformed and unformed self.

A counter presence getting close enough for a brutal if fleeting whiff death a rival and I mother never to let anything ever end badly once the rot of countenance was sighted. Three children sprung up from my unwieldy immature heart consciousness rumbling wistfully daily discourses of revenge have no place in a new sunrise. Reflected back to me from death's uncompromised stare clarity and confirmation that I turned out to be a good mother, a good mother, me a good mother. The vows of marriage if failed and once thought to be merely insidious led me to this revelation. Out of death's engulfing if premature raid I saw I knew for certain that I had climbed my mountain, I had met my greatest challenge I had not visited sins to the next generation somewhere deep in my body's memory I knew how to be a good mother. And if in the end I never got to slow dance or have soapy morning showers with the men I married I was I am a good mother and I know now that that is not *nothing*.

In this the final part of the narrative or of the story of finding and raising Luca as emotionally crippling as it was to be confronted with Frank, father, at a bedside of a near dying son in its aftermath I am confronted grasping what it means to live beyond a life challenging disease and in its aftermath to have a son radically changed with his body surgically rearranged in the most improbable way. To have a colon surgically removed is daunting but for an emerging teenage boy bursting with challenging levels of testosterone it becomes nearly unfathomable inexplicable.

It became necessary to share *my cup runneth over* (Old Testament Psalm 23:5) what followed over a twenty-two year period in the aftermath of my decision to adopt a child, Luca, a decision of earth bracing walloping indecipherable magnitude. Coursing through the vagaries of this illness, which flapped up the brutish wind of agony of my marital betrayal found me more relieved than reconciled or quiet. On a plaintive note being an older mom of sixty-three Luca being fifteen means that I will more than likely not be around to see him married with children or knowing about the work he finally does or having odd bit moments of conversation over coffee or wine. It is in truth our lives together must be lived in the moment the raw and yielding moment. He is already all but vanished into teenage life where a girl friend's love far outweighs his need of mine. I am just, just there until I'm not. Luca with wild tennis talent and the cloud burst that is first love who at fifteen pulses with tempestuous insatiable first male sexual yearnings and desire goes around these days without a colon. Trying to imagine that experience the graphic rendering is what follows.

Graphic renderings: The poop runs out of you an endless unstoppable uncontrollable stream of raw sewage from a little red puckered mouth above and to the side of your belly button and adjacent to a large healing gash of softer pink scar tissue where they sliced Luca open to pull out or gather his disintegrating colon. May 9th, 2003 cut Luca's world in two the demarcation line and the day when he became radically changed when they took a body part from him and turned his insides virtually inside out. Reduced to now walking around with a contrivance of paper and plastic stuck to his stomach affixed around the perimeters encircling this little ruby pucker of mouth into which a thick slop of waste with a singular mind of its own oozes into the bag, which inflates and puffs a rapacious pucker fish as it fills up. A slender plastic clip at the end of the bag contains the poop until unfastened like a canal lock releasing your waste plunking and splashing and toppling into the toilet bowl little flicks of water kicking up fanning out the droppings spread like a Pollack in darkened tones of brown. Ultimately, after a second surgery still with bag an *ostomy* nurse informed us that if we lay towel like a valiant cape on top of the toilet water there would be no kickback or splash officious what knowledge to have.

Still only a suckling teenager with swagger he would leave the evidence of a dump for me to clean and which obligingly I did gagging and tearful armed with antibacterial cleaner spraying hard cutting a wide swath around the bowl until not a trace of splatter remains. We have joined in a ritual of adjustment although the act is fraught with unbelievable sadness and upheaval. Some sharp fragrance wild sassafras springtime lilies sprayed around the bathroom to conceal the overbearing scents of a bowel movement gone awry. Luca's insides his guts are strangely on the outside of his body veritably truly *inside out* the world got all mixed up when they that took that organ from him. Wildly inventive, what medical research came up with removing a colon and rerouting the poop by pushing out a piece of intestine onto the tummy leaving it to protrude the rosiest red of reds puckering and spitting and spewing without cessation and without control waste shit poop.

My boy my found son from Paraguay modified changed in this way. Attacked by a colon which disintegrated after it flared up gushing with blood twisted with the vibrations the treble of labor pains or kidney stones pain medicine counter indicated palliative care not in the offing as the medical professional clumsily forked around for reasons answers to dictate call up a particular pre-ordained protocol. The unbridled colon fell apart porous and septic and was lifted like a mangled child out of his beyond tired body. Now with overly supple mouth on his stomach, poop like spiraling unconsciousness streams global warming water main breaks fulsome seeping sewage and he walks about never complaining. Friends have initialed a bag those get dumped or changed, as does the entire assemblage of paper and plastic and tape at irregular intervals. He has shown friends the mouth the ruby puckered poop swilling mouth on his tummy. And he has found his sexuality!

What does it mean to stand and walk about pooping? What does it mean never to sit on a toilet to have your butt sewed up or stuffed up and to have it sealed off from emitting waste? What does it mean to a boy verging on manhood to have his body modified in this way? When adorning your belly is your poop bag and your butt is sealed and a bag waves like a limp flag above your penis? Imagine being a boy of fifteen so exquisitely into his body and having it transformed in this way. I can't. I can't hold my sobs in place as he does his bag with a wide surgical belt. They burst out in unexpected moments. Surely mothers have lived with modified children victims of cancer accidents or god knows what else. I am not alone having had a child experience this kind of physical and medical trauma. But I inherited or sought out this indigenous child and now I subdue my cries for what he has lost and how I stood by helpless. My chest imprisons holds tight my indulgent sobs. I find no good way to bid back the solipsism of sorrow.

I watch him gallant as he leaves caring for his own new and necessary hygiene as if he is brushing his teeth and I live beyond the fathoming of all of this. I am in awe dislocated a stranger in a medical world. I am not reconciled or used to this yet. I squirm when I think about it. I become repulsed and nauseous as I clean the splatter on toilet. I do not work or leave the house I always want to make sure the toilet is clean. As if imprisoned in a virtual outhouse an irrepressible inescapable odor an unwanted intruder gets assaulted by incense burned incessantly which I buy in bundles *Obsession* in his room to reduce the stench of the poop the endless stream of poop that keeps coming night and day asleep or awake and in the bathroom with those contrived bouquets of artificial scents *heather on the hill, rustling oak*.

He will never ever be the same like a gene modified. That old boy with colon intact is gone forever. He no longer suffers. He did not die if they drove him when at the hospital near the pit of death. He is leery and frightened of going under the knife again even if it means getting rid of this contraption. Apparently Luca just had part one of the two or three part surgery. Next they *reverse* the surgery creating or building a new intestinal system in which an interior colon or bag is contrived. This surgery only takes place on Tuesdays and needs the participation of a team of surgeon's not just residents, etc. Further the doctors can only perform this surgery if the patient, Luca, is in great shape perfect health only the healthy can endure the rigors of this operation. And then it may

take more than one surgery may have to happen in two stages *we never know until we get in there* the surgeon shared in the most matter-of-fact expressionless voice. Anticipating this surgery as it nears six weeks away as I sit here a shriek that of a loon is perched on the ledge of my throat. Anticipating the operation Luca tells the doctor he doesn't want another catheter or surgical drain. *We only do this when you are healthy* the surgeon reassures *this won't be like the last time, it will be more straightforward remember you were very sick* he continues. Waves of nausea flow over me, my heart already stuffed with half dose enteric aspirins so it won't at an inappropriate moment seize and stop.

When playing tennis Luca was ranked 8th for boys sixteen when he was thirteen in the east Regional ranking by the USTA his coach who use to rile while enticing repeatedly telling Luca he could be one of the top twenty greats now offhandedly shares that he has one chance in a million of making it to the top of the heap of tennis pros. This disingenuous and sadistic tactic eluding me was the coach trying to incite a warrior or to discourage him? The coaches own grief rage or disappointment had him a no-show all through the illness. It is not something we have not taken into account. The world is broken down into the people who were there and those who were not although the group of invitees was exclusive and exclusionary. The tennis coach shaman or sham and more to the point what kind of role should he be playing to keep the fire of hope burning within my increasingly scared son?

We have a lawsuit in preparation that we will consider after the next surgery. *All we have to do is give depositions, Luca too, and then the lawyers do the rest all on a contingency plan*, I share with her, my mother, at some odd ball moment. *Oh I have known people who have gone crazy after they have given a deposition*. She my mother claims foredooming again frightening again casting gloom and doom licking her chops she needs to keep feeding the ever-famished sadist in her. She doesn't even know exactly what a deposition is but it is another chance to slice at squelch stomp on optimism and hopefulness. I lived in the path of the hell she wrought for me and that I followed ever faithfully. Suddenly I am a soaring bird Bach alive within without I am one with the fall flowers of the Conservatory Garden in Central Park. Lifted from her terrible spell when death beckoned Luca's life gave testimony song I a good mother. Archival image of a mother holding a limp suffering dying child brought me beyond her she no longer to roam in the deepest canyons of my being my heart my brain my soul no longer hers. The past scrubbed frozen in time petrified forest of scorching memory a story for a cheap get-you-back novel. The morbidity of hanging on to her slipped away when the bellows of real love fell into hand needing to keep a son alive.

Luca's father jangling out of control at a whiff of an accusation or question of his misdeeds seems a failed therapy patient boisterously defensive as if to tone down his brain. Frank subterranean man caught in flagrant rank behavior footing falters attempting to recapture chip-on-shoulder entitled pre-preposterous actions demeanor. Hungrily desirous of being born in some other century in greatly elevated circumstances, he never settled into his humble roots if he spoke of them plaintively. Frank threatened to call the authorities on me to have me removed from Luca's room hours before we were to leave the hospital grandstanding great fatherliness. Luca as he was getting readied to leave the

hospital frail and vulnerable asking, *Dad, why don't we spend more time together?* Frank responding with a tirade about how I legally prevented him from being with Luca more from the tenor of this outburst I believed I wasn't sufficiently circumspect to limit his time with Luca even more. Like the minions who find religion or *twelve steps* he now wants Luca to go to therapy.

In this the interstice between Luca having his poop running a steady lumpy stream outside his body and having poop rerouted apparently to run if constantly from within his body Frank born again therapy patient wants Luca to talk to a shrink about his feelings. Not that I am opposed to therapy but for a teenager who has made an amazing adjustment to all of this out of body experience and the unruly anticipation he feels rightfully about the coming surgery I'm not sure this is the time to dredge up difficult feelings about his father his mother his adoption their divorce and the stunning flashy adultery of his father. Further, although I hear dribs and drabs about what happens after the surgery, constant diarrhea, there is no need to brief Luca about what life will be like until he retrains his reconstructed bowel system and finds the appropriate diet and accompanying additives or medications. It all never works like it did before, according to my mother that purveyor of the cataclysmic, gleefully and hysterically as if on a mission to deliver a breathless omen. Before what when his colon broke loose into throbbing hellish pain and the bloods of hell? This much personal clarity throws me in the path of an asphyxiating danger I'm not sure one is suppose to look so keenly and deeply into the eyes of one's past to find it at such close range the pain a fist around a poised throat waiting for the tourniquet death to choke life off.

Luca's father and my former husband, how canonically comic, climbed out of the catacombs of blue collar choir boy and family who thought everyone who lived on the Upper West Side *fancy* – *you and your fancy friends*, his mother's barb – the *National Inquirer* their bathroom reading and nary a book lay on an end table for sure *fancy* people read those sensational publications in supermarket checkout lines if they can get their hands on it I knew whimsically. But *fancy* had a weightier meaning found in his parents' scurrilous finger pointing this an indictment a fear that straying into the world of the *fancy* meant a fraying of the fabric of family and of course they knew of what they feared. Strangely I found everything in their home and lives strangely compelling enticing my craving for normal as in eating a meal without riotous outbreaks of rage the predictable firework displays in both the homes of my mother and my first husband. I languished in their rudimentary chatting about this and that over *coffee an'* without outbursts of searing emotion boiling over searing burns already so thickly lacquering my long suffering insides. I desperately wanted normal and got the *National Inquirer* left about as the family's reading matter of choice. Frank's father held court while he crapped, the *Inquirer* draping his v-parted thighs. Seduction by offering a cup of the mundane I learned beyond the *coffee an'* what I believed good hearts were like. Dirty little secrets also lurked in homes with only scandal rags.

This offspring of theirs into whose lap I ultimately fell tumbled down the rabbit hole of intellectual arrogance a chip like a French general's epaulette on his shoulder he leapfrogged the eons of the canon did his dissertation on Foucault. This brood of a boy

whom I took into my bed because I believed it would make me normal and that the promise he dangled like catnip of loving women and sex would keep me and my insides supple moist and young. Ah sex as in **Ah Wilderness* (*Eugene O'Neill) magical bliss convinced by very early memories of disturbing sexual midnight forays of parents daren't and doing sex the odd animal noises leading to my instinctive authorship of all things sexual. For much of my early childhood I believed that I invented sex thus soaked in subterranean dreams never remembered glimpses of the forbidden fabrications daydreamed me awake. Bumbling words that exude the thick molasses of denial and being denied a kind of bitterness goo from sperm spurting off after masturbating oh the many hours Frank back turned to me his legs weary from the skirt chasing of woman half my age or younger. Proclaiming often *I relish tight asses defined upper arms women of my generation*, females born of the '50's, never would dream of tightening up tummies asses or forearms any more than they would let on that they had a serious thought or competent mind knowing *men hated strong brainy women and that they never catch husbands*. Cultural clashes ransacked our bed and fed into our increasing discomfort and lies.

Pelted daily like tossed chestnuts from an old tree Frank assailed me a female iteration of *Methuselah, you are old loose assed jaw sagging sexless bitch who can't even cook I forbid you from making marinara sauce until you apprentice at the elbow of my mother*. Driven to desperation once even committing a cardinal sin, which he sniffed out *Fee-fi-fo-fum* when I daringly embellished his mother's recipe with a spot of *Classico* tossed artfully from a jar with the carefully simmering tomatoes garlic and peppers. This furor from a boy for whom the derivative was a first language he a *feral child* as one academic mentor derisively and contemptuously conferred on him. Frank a pretender to an academic throne a fiction that went too far afield he with overly inflated dreams needed it to be understated and a pat obsequious he climbed way high. *I've gone up and you've gone done or I'm on my way up and you're on your way down* he repeatedly tell me when we were driving north to see his family having recently left the old world of the Bronx to relocate in fashionable blue nosed Rhinebeck, N.Y. the home of the *Beekman Arms* the oldest Inn in America. Reading this roiled with cascading bulimia to retch my insides out seeking freeing up a riptide of convulsive incontrovertible past decisions and choices. Frank may be a reincarnation of **Clyde Griffiths* (Theodore Dreiser American Tragedy) but I put myself happily in the boat to be drowned as if drowning an extra kitty or from an unwanted litter.

Manifest in the dilemma of sharing a child and sitting with a former husband Luca's father around the bedside of a son battling a life threatening illness threw me into a catacomb of upheaval. This marriage was no reality show match I stepped into his arms as sure as an arrow shot from an archery bow he was my bulls eye and as sure as days turn over to the next there at the bedside a tumultuous shift as Luca's colon had been extracted from his insides I was no one anymore who could have picked this man as husband and father for a child. Normal is a quality I eschew hold in disdain I now fervently want to be strange weird unwieldy I suffer in the aftermath of two bad marriages and have to keep peeling my fingers from my own neck when the past encircles looms about me a thick storm bloated cloud. Day after unruly day I sat facing

Frank now as freaky foreign and undesirable as my mother whom I now have forgiven and feel free to hate. Topsy-turvy I was blind-sighted in my over forty sexual awakening bait for the whiff of ecstatic orgasm Frank dangled a lifting penis. I fell like lead for sad eyes a book in hand an intrepid longing for the world I held in my hands my tits pricking up like dogs ears after a mating call. Father Frank was finally an elegant poseur a fully anointed credentialed interloper Ph.D. insisting Luca gather the golden fleece of psychotherapy blind to this his son during this interregnum.

Oy vey iz mir, (Yiddish - *Oh, woe is me*) Luca's therapist said face cupped in his hands swaying like a wheat shaft when we excitedly *you won't believe this* told him that Frank had brought a woman *it's his girlfriend Mom, do something* into the house. The family had been going to therapy for a couple of years to appease unnerved school personnel and Luca's father secretly harboring a belief that adopted boys can go bad something some academic colleague had passed on to him in a peak of great collegiality. Luca couldn't sit still in a circle in pre-school the circle a sacred time for overly verbal three and four year olds to share their vaunted opinions taking turns being civil this the beginning of their introduction into civil society. Luca wanted to roam build block towers to protect and knock down to keep fellow classmates at bay having an enhanced sense of territoriality many objects in the room part of his kingdom the circle belonging to everyone else. This *mine and yours* problematic while at pre-school Bank Street with *hit squads* heady with credentials and power jutted fingers at Frank and me. Frank flapped along sadly in flight formation as the *hit squad* days later shoved Luca into room door locked tight sharing later that this was some sort of vanguard behavioral modification more snake pit more criminal more liable to me. Frank lambskin in one hand became just a very ordinary *bobblehead* in the presence of these self-appointed experts. Frank lived pitched in the conditional imprisoned by what official and officious people thought. More banal than ironic this *expert* on Foucault unable to glean *the wheat from the chaff* dangerous incarcerating power structures held Frank in sway even when the object of their venal pursuit was his very own son. I guess moment of the sheepskin on the wall never got internalized.

Ready to wrest Luca from all formal schooling and plunk him in the middle of hundreds of acres in Wyoming running with stallions rather than have him heaved into the rattletrap of labels and experts. We found a therapist to appease those on high who turned out to be as wonderfully **mashugana* (Yiddish - *crazy foolish dopey*) and out there. He was short and thin/fat and he dug the hell out of Luca and persisted in getting officials to tone down a notch or two their inflammatory declamations about him. He devised a series of words a *Luca vocabulary* that gave them a way to interpret the reality within which they could cope or be with Luca and all this when he was 6, 7, and 8. The therapist seemingly in touch infused with some *Kabbalah* mystical wisdom was building for and with Luca an inner life that could withstand fight off the onslaught of death some seven years later. Frank bringing a girl he was fucking around the house on false pretext even threw this awkward aardvark of a therapist into a roiling chant of *Oy vey iz mir* cradling his face and getting Luca and me to laugh knowing we could carry on. I hold that laugh around just below my breastbone just above my sobs like chlorine it sucks out the pollutants.

With poop flowing from his insides like spring thaw *why do I have to have a shit bag* he asked plaintively as it leaked all over fresh bedding? His father suggesting that this was a time for psychotherapy to pry Luca open discovering why he didn't feel comfortable with his father and was at times disrespectful to his mother the therapist in question, not our loved *mashugana*, had a face shot full of Botox in a therapy appropriate facial freeze. Emphatically asserting that maybe once his body is more intact perhaps that will be the time to explore these weighty lifelong issues. We had a son who held himself together with KFC fried chicken strips and Blue PowerAde not in any condition for the blade of therapeutic inquisition if his father's new mantra was therapy, therapy, and therapy ad nauseam.

Luca means more to me than anything he claimed as he ran off to Brazil with his lover moving on to a life with Gail on the Upper West Side above 96 Street a genuine Upper West Side Jew whose house he tells Luca he cleans Saturday afternoons. Was Luca a representation of the *three wise monkeys* "*see no evil, hear no evil speak no evil* Luca who never saw a father remove a fork in Riverdale now hears as if a verdant *Mad-* ad for cleaning products on the *Home Channel*. Wondering was this the time or would there be a time or should there be a time to share the alter-tack of family stories Luca was calling forth if by hurtling hardly suppressed cry-outs questioning his father and my role in the ultimate son betrayal school committees recounting and documenting Luca's classroom sins. Did I join the elliptical rogue gang of experts as they described Luca, our son, as the ultimate irreparably damaged *bad seed*? Do I caste myself as the ultimate foot washing *Mary Magdalene* and tell how his father joined forces with the gang of thugs rendering doom-saying predictions of a profligate outlier future for Luca? Do I take the moral high ground and tell how I was pinned a withering moth on a science slab my protests further evidence of their derangement and toxicity? And once Frank and I advanced outside the parameters of the Bank Street School or sad to say even Manhattan School for Children beyond the range of buckshot and earshot Frank pointed sharpened butcher knife fingers (his father and his father before him trained in the high art of butchering – meats) bellowing with indignation and rage as I stood if wanly in opposition to him and the team of *Grand Wizards* as in the Klan).

This boy man-child father husband *Oy Vey Ist Mir* needed a confessional booth transfigured for the Upper West Side as psychotherapy and ultimately as a condition of the inevitable divorce or else be designated as adulterer in legal papers he went and predictably worshipped his therapist and claimed to have found nirvana oh the beauty of loving a high beam focused solely on an unwavering narcissist. Therapy, therapy, therapy he couldn't get off this Freud slap happy surfing the heavens Frank hoping deep down that the therapist would prayerfully find me inadequate as wife and lover and Luca just an *adoption lemon* thus vindicating or necessitating his philandering. Of life's dulcet ironies, *you are very good mother, Doctor So and so, said so*, among my dearest friends many multiples older and Frank's mentor happened to be seeing the same prince of a psychiatrist who informed her beyond any sound ethical practice of this evaluative note of my role as mother. *The New Yorker, Thurber* was abundant with just such loopy sentiments.

For all my vitriol and flippancy when he leaves a message on voice mail saying *I'm at Gail's* it's a sharp jab at my heart already held together by those baby half aspirins. And do I register fury at my mouth when it mounts verbal retaliatory assaults at something he's said the vitriol reveal my rawness. What enormous pleasure he takes when I charge him with barbs betraying my already overrun heart thus unlatching the rant *you were the bitch who kept me in her shadow*. Callow his avenging cock and cockiness gratified by breaking me dangling in the dung of my halfness. This marriage that should never have been and could never have been saved finds us ironically glued together by the sloppy goo of a found common son and no therapy will ever help us quite fathom how we got here. Luca just fell from the sky into the tumbleweed of the unresolved unknowable and sinful. When I was fifty-eight and Luca eight he peeled off as if the *lead car of the Indy 500* to lay on a beach in Ipanema. Luca never tired of recounting how he saw his father *massaging her legs on our black leather couch* to one of the more attentive and kind nurses to whom he was assigned when his pain stabbing bloody colon was still part of his body. The essential question: *Dad, how could you betray me like this? When you adopted me?* Lore of family life stories like chips in a kaleidoscope collide each living with the one that fits right at that particular moment in time.

Loss, Afterbirth written the decade after the adoption and *Needing Family No Matter What* drawn directly from a journal kept in the process of adopting and bringing Luca home is a story in three parts written over a twenty-two year period. Choices have repercussions we live in their aftermath riling fractious or blissful and affirming we are their victims caught like bugs in webs of our own weaving. Afternoons holding my infant son in swaddling in a courtyard on the outskirts of Asuncion, Paraguay bordered by flowers and attended to by countless humming birds, I wonder at times wistfully if I had stayed and he had grown as a shoot off a tropical tree mixed up within his own gene pool would I ultimately have learned Spanish so challenged by another tongue and joined the ring of faithful women tending in the car of the lawyer-keeper?

Yesterday, the next 16th second was given me (unidentified artist in Guggenheim) and in that second I sat unflinchingly at the bedside of Luca as he lay dying wasting enveloped by pain that rivaled a woman's birth labor and this day after day for almost four months. I an abandoned bride and a mother a cheated on wife and a mother a woman for whom the finger pointed wrong picking out two husbands as if out of a police line-up as if a certain magnetism archetypes of the unsavory welded me to the I do's forever and ever through sickness my own Faustian promise not to disrupt a bad bad-assed Holocaust beclouded past. In the end the lost forever unidentified love of my life was never to be found in the *next sixteen seconds* of any time or any day it was ephemera beyond my reach. The chasm I crossed greater than any need for adult love far more daunting and brutal at its core unconditional love for my children. My babies, all three, live always within my domain if domiciled miles away they have formed the delectable's of my life my flowers my sunsets my rubies. Uncanny but true the word mother settles comfortably in my being *flesh of my flesh* (Genesis 2:23) with it is solitariness a Mary mother with a virtual mate love kicked up havoc in my life and left me sloppily dangling at the side of suicide neither here nor there *Live or Die Anne Sexton* so advised, *I say Live, Live because of the sun, the dream, the excitable gift*. I lived cradling my babies, my babies, my babies.

June 8th, 2003, less than a week from Luca's fifteenth birthday he naps most of the time finally at home in his own bed more than a month after surgery with a gash healing slowly in the center of his tummy and a big, white plastic sack dropping like a wilting peony from the same belly containing the ever overrunning small intestine. Peering out like a saucy ruby mouth from his belly the unruly intestine never stopping muddled winter ice sliding down a body (into the ostomy bag) excrement not anymore to be hardened by the extraction of water the now removed colon's job bowel goop constantly streaming down like putrid tears like water filled with rust. With what poise and grace does he accept this strangely modified part of himself this boy ranked eighth in tennis for boys sixteen in the New York tri-state area when only thirteen this athlete this near man entering the height of burgeoning sexuality this 9th grader with cane stooped over bed sores still simmering on his back legs a new born colts wobble *this is life-transforming* everyone said.

Personal folly a house built on top of ancient drives and desires never articulated or realized. Somehow I wound up in the fall of 2003 at sixty-three divorced twice absolutely alone with no prospects for love or even a hope for one without a job being more controversial or less wanted than I care at this time to consider. Dumped like land fill at the side of the engaged world an onlooker attempting to reconcile the prophesy with the reality I saw myself a little girl the woman I am at sixty-three in my full predicament.

On September 8th, 2003 Luca walked into his high school as if he had never missed a day of ninth grade. Luca's eyes betrayed the overly late night e-mail conversations with his girlfriend a necessity I registered duly with self-restraint preparing for this momentous day. He walked off a severed umbilical cord a veritable miracle waddling to hold up his jeans, which clung precariously, and fashionably to the edge of his sealed up butt. In the chill of early fall mornings, Luca, weighty backpack slung over one shoulder goes off to his popular New York City public high school. Because of the generous offer of tutoring by his teachers throughout the summer months of 2003 he was able to join his 10th grade class each strangely touched by the courage and responsiveness of a student who had had a veritable near death experience.

On September 16th he and his girlfriend celebrated their first anniversary. They share one of those unwieldy and overpowering teenage first loves that defy interference or judgment and tolerate no rival or parental counter voice. Luca and his girlfriend signed up for the cross-country team *this is not an opium den of cohorts* I snapped back at his father when he questioned whether Luca joined just to be with his girlfriend and if he did? The force behind my sharp tongue is a repository of images of Luca and I standing stunned by the door while he the same father left us to be in Brazil in time for New Year's Eve with his girlfriend nearly five years ago. At the first track meet in late September Luca ran 2.5 miles in 20:38 minutes on what is generally acknowledged as one of the toughest cross country courses in the East, Van Cortlandt Park. And on October 4, 2003 on the same course, he was ranked in the top fifteen out of a group of 180 high school aged runners and came away clasping a medal for his efforts. Without

equivocation we can say that that Luca he can run. His girlfriend a less practiced and conditioned runner unfortunately needed paramedical attention from over exertion. By way of a reference point, in early November of 2002 as part of the rigors of his tennis training, Luca could run three miles, on an indoor course, in less than fifteen minutes.

As I try to locate where we all are at this moment of time, I know that Luca is up on his feet and literally running and in love and hopefully studying that being an ongoing source of concern throughout his schooling. I find myself going about the house nagging Luca about bedtimes and curfews and the need to study and maintaining a C average. Thus far no calls home from teachers, *the warnings of or else*, and carry on as if Nancy Reagan and her *just say no* campaign about drugs and drink and leave a fresh supply of condoms in the draw by his bed. Fortunately I haven't lost my softer and sober mother's touch. Shop-worn and used up I still spend the barren hours angry with myself wondering if the nagging is more abusive and self-serving than helpful.

Christmas days when Luca's big sister and brother were teenagers we celebrated our half of the day with brunch at Tavern on the Green where stockings filled with condoms among other trinkets were presented before they left to join their father for his half of the day. And when Luca's father Frank call to tell Luca to reach him at Gail's house a dangerous friction percolates up to challenge a fragile inner balance. These words *Gail's house* countenance the ever troubling why and why and why of my life watching the ever circling vulture so much of me already dead so much of me wanting to die. Frank came to his senses and saw the wisdom of spending the occasional weekend with Luca at his house and not a Gail's where Luca shared a space with her teenage son a student with bragging rights at Fieldston Frank prudently not subletting the only space he and Luca had shared as an independent unit. Womanizing never again swear to loyalty Frank kept dark back coop as a failsafe as well as a haven for Luca for whom most of his social life resided on the West Side, *I'm going to the West Side* he would often recount. Whatever the motive Frank had secured anchorage for a son who had lost an intact family and a colon all in the course of a few years. My tongue pushing against tightly drawn lips exasperated often withholding commentary a counter voice pushing on already vulnerable and so inclined Luca to categorically refuse to ever spend time with Frank the better in me always salvages the good the bile I keep for my persistent calling out to death.

Halloween 2003 just weeks from the next phase of surgery Luca dresses as a patient in a hospital with a big opening around his butt and a contrivance into which artificial poop spills. Luca with palpably self-effacing humor prepares for the menacing future of what is to come all unknowable and the unavoidable. A third surgery looms like a hopeful full moon. A new body part will be put together inside Luca's tummy to work like a colon, sort of. That is to come. The surgery is scheduled for early

December 2003. We drift from year to year demarcated by surgical dates and unruly expectation.

Hosanna for love however did Luca manage to find the love of his life his first great and true love without knowing or perhaps anticipating he had to have someone at the other end to come to someone to stay alive for someone for whom his heart beats? This love is everything perhaps too much everything. Who knows what it signifies what need it fills or knows life's viability without its pulse? The intensity of their passion for each other sometimes sizzles the air my ears perk for danger emotions at this time are like a wild billowing sea. Skirmishes sound like the world has just ended. Teenagers don't register have an accounting that **tomorrow will be a better or another day* climactic moments are endings. I wait stiffened through their frequent fights, which are always about jealousy and flirting and how a boy without a colon has his stomach as mine does turn?

****After all tomorrow is another day - Vivien Leigh - Gone with the Wind***

**... Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing. — Macbeth (Act 5, Scene 5, lines 17-28)*

Come on Luca you can do it! Stay alive! Stay alive! Please Luca stay alive!

The fugue configured doesn't lift, five years after Frank rubbed his Brazilian lover's legs like two sticks as she laid prone before our fire place the tinder that set our house on fire. *She had a cramp in her leg*, he said. Our son's stomach churned the churn of a child age nine who knows he is witnessing something frightening repugnant dangerous an event that sings the pages of the *old book* before words for the event have been formed before a vocabulary word rests easily in his lexicography. There is something wrong scary *why is my Dad rubbing her leg like that as she lays on our couch our big beautiful leather couch the couch that no one else has ever had, my Dad. When my Mom walks in I'll tell her what I saw. It is naughty and wrong. I'm scared.* Or so our son thought. I know his preoccupations with the couch because I overheard him telling a nurse Lydia, a particularly sympathetic one about the couch and the apartment with more bedrooms than one could count. *I lived there until my father brought his girlfriend home and she lay down on that couch. Then we sold the apartment and we moved and my parents got divorced.* 'Tis true all true and five years later as our son Luca lay dying this story is what he wanted to share.

At sixty-three single and celibate dig in to find strength to hold our son's hand as he fights back death the narrative of the illness is recounted. Life takes peculiar turns when I held Luca in the courtyard in Paraguay at Antonio's house falling in love with Antonio thinking I might have to live there forever and learn Spanish languages being my challenge my mountain did I ever anticipate that when Luca was fourteen he would nearly die? Do we know when throwing down the gauntlet of love what the promise to love *no matter what* in actuality means? Luca and I have stepped to the edges of the heaving abyss we have shoved off death from its weighty carelessly waiting breath enshrouding his face about his neck. We have bravely Luca and I built a home filled with love and dignity if fractured and we try to accommodate his father's latest live-in girlfriend or rather the girlfriend with whom he now lives.

Luca's father has once again like a proper welder's smelt fused his life to another a woman. Lurking echoes of his operatic solipsistic caws, "*I found my son, my son, my son and I love him.*" Reverberating in our found family lore, when Frank disregarded and disrespected an offered eighteen month old Paraguayan boy because his ears jutted out a little unwieldy this in front of wily foster care family members and our Miami adoption lawyer who fully expected him to fall on his knees prostrate before the boy proclaiming paternal and forever abiding love. Second chances this *Yiddishe Kup* of mine, explaining to our Miami based lawyer when she stormily reported that she refused to Frank have that child, *he really wants an infant a newborn* at which point he was taken to meet the three week old who became our Luca proclaiming loudly and publicly when handed the swaddled abandoned infant, "I found my son etc. and so forth." Well, Italians are good at opera and Frank's mother whom he mostly flecks off the face of the earth sings arias from *Aida* and *Madame Butterfly*. Nipping at his feet a montage that of a son and a viscerally disappointed father longing for a son not the one who now stands nearly at eye-level. Frank's blind-sided to the wonder of a life if not the pure brood Harvard bound Bar Mitzvah Frank's bloated self-importance bionic sense of entitlement created irrevocable

distance from a son who constantly and inevitably disappointed Luca just wouldn't fall in line follow the script. The *my son, my son* Frank lost him long ago his intemperance his fragmented episodic fatherly aspirations a splintered glass identity lapses. This prince has a son in name only rages spilling into a leg tugged an arm fighting to stay in a socket the hair pulled ear bitten the dog thrown the boy flung across the room the emptying of Luca's play gun sack on the side of the rode the cache which the boy kept to protect his father and mother from invaders and molesters who might come and kill them figments of his imagination who ever knows?

Who ever knows what precisely is the cutting blow that scatters asunder the longing the love of a father and son? Who could anticipate that I would stare death in the face and watch it saunter reluctantly defeated off? Meaning, meaning, how to shape it? I know when I became Luca's Mother it was for life promised before a Paraguayan judge and our Paraguayan lawyer Antonio had a greater resonance than could be imagined when uttered. Love for an adult partner never worked for me I was too much of an unknown or unknowable to myself to fall in love. Men were a splat of fear on a canvas a chance collage I an inveterate trauma victim was always in the presence of an animal that would harm me from whom I had to protect myself. And Antonio, our lawyer, whom I without equivocation loved and trusted, would never have engaged with me as an ancillary wife.

December 16th, 2003 as the shadow of a year ending looms Luca sits slumped over head tucked into his chest like a weather doomed bird instinct to migrate clicked off Luca sits in a wheel chair in the surgical anteroom waiting to be picked up and moved into a room of high beams, scalpels, anesthesia, and pure chance. Idle chat had stopped. Fear like the goodbyes stuck in our throats along with frozen gesture and thought. Unlike the first surgery when we fast walked knees wobbling a new calf after the racing gurney moving Luca faster than the speed of light toward the surgical knife this time was scheduled clearly and carefully chosen not to disrupt school and general life. Christmas time was approaching and that meant breaks from formal daily commitments.

Luca prepared for this surgery to rebuild or reconnect or make new a body part, which would function more or less like a colon by playing in a tennis tournament during Thanksgiving. He was signed up to play in Level 1 Boys 18 after having only practiced with his club mornings at 5 for two or three weeks. Bag tucked into surgical belt racket in hand towel and water in hand and off he went. He was on the first court in full view of a group of tennis family friends whose hearts were all but stopped as he lifted his racket

for a first serve. 6-3, 6-2, in record time he polished his opponent off. Our customary embrace, win or lose, were rocked with the kind of sobs that lift from having left death breathless empty handed grasping. In the next round the bag broke and sludge ran across his lower body like a broken sewer. He took a medical default to his coaches' consternation. Next day as is customary he worked his partner out as he prepared to play in a semi-final round.

Luca lives with his bag poop spewing from a mouth on his tummy somehow larger and exaggerated like a clown's mouth. This bag is scheduled to come off and the mouth protruding on the tummy to close on its own and his butt reopened to business as usual sometime in the Spring and then projected is the year long retraining process with his new body part. He still thinks of himself as a tennis player and he is still in love and loved and I'm not sure which is the greater miracle, love or the life and death struggle with colitis.

Out of the swinging doors came our surgeon barely five foot five to meet with Luca asking if he had questions introducing to the anesthesiologist saying, "He's the best anesthesiologist at the hospital!" and then escorting Luca into surgery. "Come on Luca get out of the wheel chair, you're a big healthy strapping boy we will walk into surgery together!" Luca lifted up and without glancing back and a quick brush kiss walked off shoulder to shoulder two friends two buddies he towering the doctor having easy conversation sauntering and then disappearing beyond the swinging doors an entourage of two anesthesiologists following after body guards.

Christmas day we stayed in the hospital after the successful or uneventful surgery as they like to say pneumonia related to surgery and fevers were some presenting complications but they seemed like nothing compared to last surgery. Christmas eve the infectious disease doctor part of the medical team who saved Luca's life arrived having gotten a call from our internist who was in Africa on a safari, *nothing's going to happen to this boy after we struggled so to save his life, you know he stopped breathing doing surgery*, he informed our assigned nurse who also had taken care of Luca after the last surgery. She recounted the conversation tears tumbling my heart stopped I had no idea that the life and death struggle the medical team kept referring to meant just that. Neither Luca nor Frank hears the mantra I silently chant *the time is not right*. I have yet to absorb what this truly means. (*A great man's greatest good luck is to die at the right time. Eric Hoffer, philosopher and author, The True Believer.*)

The image of his walking off with his doctor clearly choosing to submit to the surgery his shoulders relaxed trusting this man who also leaned into him trusting himself was as close to a poetic and existential moment as I have had. Reconciliation with the past still is not fully possible. My heart fits and starts when I see Luca's father. *She's is a dominatrix* Luca observes casually referring to his father's current girlfriend. There is wisdom in all of this.

Friday, February 13th, the day we were to leave for the rain forest in Costa Rica. A trip planned in August by Sarah Luca's true love and close friends so that he would have something to look forward to beyond the penetratingly horrible horizon of the second surgery possibility beyond the blank a plan. She had been in Costa Rica with her mother and a school friend in August the year before. They stayed in a five hundred-acre reforestation plantation owned by her friend's parents and a school friend of Luca's as well, high into thinning air in the rain forest a road pretending to be a road leading ever upward and into the clouds. Sarah fantasized this a trip back to the magical place where she imagined walking with Luca holding hands and kissing high above the clouds of their first early enviable rich love. Forlorn their hopes dashed by the surgeon whom we included in the decision to travel and whose letter we needed if emergency medical help was necessary his word being law. "No," he said, "it is too soon. No they don't know this illness this surgery. They could not Medevac you out if you got a blockage..." and he didn't even quite know how really inaccessible the place was.

In response, this kid of mine got his hair shorn, a baldy, and with a bag swelling with poop escorted the small group of friends to the airport at three in the morning returning at five alone. He wished them well told them to have a good time. The group, which planned the trip for him mounted the plane without him to ascend the sky minus one really two I was to be on the trip as well to keep his girlfriend's mother company and to watch over him as well. Locked in his room mere hours later the airplane soaring to its rain forest destination along with a giant bag of pretzels the salt to stem the putrid flow washed down with a Coke and Sprite. The afternoon sun blisters across the February Saturday afternoon Jonathan Schwartz playing Sinatra on the radio and I write to you whoever you are. My heart searches out a way to accommodate this revelation this son this unbelievable child who truly lives and relives "death is the mother of beauty".

*She says, "But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss."
Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
And our desires.*

Wallace Stevens

Mom, want to know what my tag as in graffiti is? He asks March 25, 2004 as we pass buildings out of a time warp from the '70's and '80's marked up swirling codes of spray paint on the way to see his girlfriend Sarah in a Upper West Side kid production of, *Kiss Me Kate*. Claiming that the street art as his, *Bag, Mom, it is Bag!* Still the poop slops into a bag still his intestines are inside out still he has humor still my heart seizes lately images of our worst moments hit me in the eye photographic stills of the inexplicable and unforgettable bag my bag, bag my son has a bag. Two more medical procedures left one a camera goes up his butt to see how he has healed and the surgeon scours his incision for loose staples. Then, oh then, in weeks by June the bag comes off the intestines are stuffed back inside and the new body part takes over. A year of finding the right diet and clenching and releasing his sphincter muscles should set him on new course. The future will truly belong to him. How will he remember his father's fingers pulling, tugging,

flinging or massaging and rubbing? How will he remember me? How much will he long for Lucia his birth mother who out of love wanting more for him had him designated abandoned and who gave him to me? Will this to adopt Luca be a divine event or a decision by default and misplaced longing thrust me once again from grown up love to the arc of mothering?

June 15th, 2004

Luca weighing in at 164 entered the pre-surgery waiting area. Anesthesiologists and nurses asking him the same questions over and over again, “what are you allergic to, etc?” When asked at in-take what ethnicity he was he answered, “Native white,” a first public declaration. For religion, he answered, “Buddhist, though not yet, Christened Catholic, but don’t put any down.” Who knew he had grown so definitive about who he was?

Luca left this time on a gurney for surgery we kissed and waved goodbye only his father and I were present. His surgeon grumbled that he should be walking. This time after some preliminary tests he was going to have the *bag* taken away and to have the plumbing the new colon take over six months of settling in with some minor back-tracking the surgeon felt he was ready. The surgery took some four hours the recovery room another five and then he was moved to the adult floor at the surgeon’s request where the surgeon knew the team and its more aggressive approach to recovery. On the adult floor patients were required to be more independent and to take on more of their own healing process. Regulations meant that Luca got a private room but an adult had to be present at all times. The last night I got phobic and felt I couldn’t spend another night another 3am at a hospital bedside. I had topped over. Fortunately his father agreed to stay. I had taken on a full-time job within the last six months and didn’t have the freedom and flexibility to scatter hours as well as keep watch throughout days and nights. At work, two days after surgery Luca called to say, “I made three poops in the toilet!” Tears of relief burst from my eyes my heart quickened. It was beyond belief. He had fought death hand-to-hand and won. I a by-stander and a handmaiden will never grasp it fully. On a walk through the hospital corridor holding hands two days later he lifted our clasp skyward and proclaimed, “Mom, we did it! We did it!” In prayer I had said I would give my life readily trade places. What life would be left for me if his fight had not been so fierce so intent on beating any obstacles? My fate wrapped around his youthful life like a thick vine.

Nearly a month past surgery his colon his new colon works but it will be a year of retraining. He has to find a diet that works find a natural yogurt supplement that will soothe his new body part and to regularly exercise his sphincter muscles. His mind has to get around the new person he has become. What about tennis? What about school? What about never being the way he was before he became so gravely ill? Amazingly love seems to have worked for Luca he has true love he has known a great love. Beyond that and seemingly impossible given the strange construct of his body he as experienced himself sexually. A rage simmers Luca always harbored an inordinate intensity now it spills over no longer distilled and channeled into his life as a highly competitive tennis

player. Tennis, which kept him intact and focused, kept him in the medical fight for his life now curdles, pulsates painfully beneath his skin. The future does or does not belong to him.

Called upon to watch a child of mine a chosen child battle death and the very death with which I have flirted for such a long time. Reconciling my shallow contest and the real one that should occupy me as I step into being sixty-four. The possibilities narrow time shortens how will I step into Luca's hard lessons my measure?

Fast-forward to June 2004 no bag the plumbing in place it works. The little mouth on the tummy is to close on its own. Luca sits to poop if often and if it is more liquid than solid. Small miracles great persistence more calm and patience than anticipated the little mouth takes longer to close. The gash on the stomach protrudes we learn it leans against a potentially threatening hernia which will have to be attended to in six or seven or more months when everything works perfectly and Luca is perfectly healed he will need to go beneath the knife for yet one more time. I will make the incision prettier when I take care of the hernia, the surgeon comments the one who had walked us back from death and who had kept Luca from the much planned for trip to Costa Rica.

Luca with intense tutoring passed two of the five Regents Exams necessary for high school graduation in NYC public schooling. Biology/Living Science and Global History down, English, Math, and one more History to go September 11th has passed that sad reckoning day and school opens for Luca on the 13th. He will be entering the 11th grade in good standing having never fully been to the 9th or 10th grades. And most importantly he and a fellow tennis player will be co-captains of the tennis team. He needs to work his way back into tennis and to school he moves slowly reflectively and acutely self-aware. Stanford and Harvard may in truth be only breaths away as my big son Jeremy, says. Who knows? This found child indigenous Guaraní with a splash of other with no colon and a USTA (United States Tennis Association) tennis ranking. *Life has big things waiting for you* my daughter-in-law informs him *further anytime a person so young gets so great a challenge it means big things lay ahead*. Well she may know she tap danced her way at sixteen to Broadway high stepping out of a virtual farmland dung heap of family misery in a town near Appalachia with a population of four hundred.

Me, I want to see that Luca successfully completes high school becoming a professional tennis player if that is still his desire. And I need to find a way to live in harmony and peace with my current reality without the potency of recrimination indulgent self-pity regret and remorse so that at the moment real and final darkness comes I will not think that for all of it in the end I did indeed *miss the time*.

Most of it's slow and after the fact and has to do with going on without something, Something we thought was necessary – essential – but then discovered it merely made all the difference: one could go on if one really wanted to.

Counting the Ways
Samuel Beckett

February 2005 and On

On my tombstone it will not say RIP, it will say FIP, and that means I inquire? You know no Rest in Peace but Finally in Peace. In June 2003 he nearly died on the table in surgery having arrived 'half dead' that a clinical expression from his internist and now nearly three years later he is almost unrecognizable. He who at 13 was the 8th ranked tennis player for boys' 16 in the tri-state area now walks as a plant drooping bending away from a light that is unyielding his arms are pitched at a 45 degree angel like little bird wings more a prop nearly atrophied his hands cup his butt just inside the low slinging extra large colorful Gap boxers. He rushes slantwise against the narrow angular hallway into the bathroom flings down the toilet seat and with whimpering sounds like a trapped nocturnal animal caught off guard in the wrong field or territory bathwater blisters and rumbles just below his cries a tympani of high water pressure rapidly filling a tub the water swirls his toes curled knotted against the excruciations. "Turn on the tub" a shrill thin waning and depleted ongoing order no niceties no please and thank you. Constant calls for steaming baths become the sign that his body has ripped through his fear of shedding waste sliding intemperately down his legs and stomach forcing him to tunnel through the pain to follow an urge to submerge him steaming bath waters that is as new to his body as an infant's.

He invites me to sit on the toilet as he soaks in the bath, straight out of Marat Sade who in the Royal Shakespeare production soaked in an endless well of water to relieve the eczema of his guilt ridden sex driven skin. So Luca sits in a tub as the water does not by intention fill up but runs hard just enough force to settle just above his groin. It is a Sitz bath a butt bath. Like an old geezer or codger he holds back releasing poop excrement through his butt causing greater fearsome agony of a dimension only expressed in Mahler's Sixth (*Tragische*) Symphony. He has been trying to use his butt as he calls it since June 2004 when the surgical team finally freed the recently built substitute colon so that excrement would not run out of his stomach into an ostomy bag but through the *normal* route. How we take for granted using a toilet to move our bowels. Infants I now see with two newly arrived grandchildren spend most of their early months learning to eat digest and eliminate. My tennis boy is barely months old with this part of his body. His ribs stick out like end-of life anorexics or rabid malnutrition sufferers his hips are easily defined and *if you want to know*, he says to me as I sit near him as he is soaking in the tub barely shielding his uncircumcised penis *this is how I spend my days lying in a dark room or sitting in a tub*. He lives in fear of going to the bathroom and of the searing pain it causes both in the act and in the digesting of the necessary food to live. He eats no vegetables or fruits only jelly donuts an occasional milkshake frozen iced strudels pizza slices Subway subs now his favorite with chipotle marinated chicken slices with cheese and bacon. His yens for food have still the urgency of a pregnant woman obsessed by a need *for pickles and ice cream*. Occasionally he asks me to recount the day he passed out in the bathroom and I held him, Mary with gaunt and withering Jesus son, until sunrise and a pre-scheduled doctor's appointment while sucking on a bottle of scotch to stifle the

screams a riptide of inconsolability erupting from my heart my belly my imagination a grim reaper's delight.

Come on Luca you can do it! Stay alive! Stay alive! Please Luca stay alive!

Loss. Loss of a major organ loss of a school life loss of friends and a 16 year old social life loss of a girl friend and loss of his ultimate goal in life. Did I say his ashen face with haunted eyes pleading distressingly to his first true love, her eyes averted *I lived for you I lived because of you, I stayed alive for you!* This pleading that went on for hours after midnight with the cacophony of despair the retching wrenching baying and begging went on for hours and for days *you promised me you would come over, I waited all day, all week all of the life that is left in me!* I sat nearby on a chair in the living room he was ranting and pleading as he looked at his computer for an instant message back from *metoosqueaky*. I sat there in the dark my heart knew those pleas my mouth had bottled them choked them down they lived a parasite in my belly in my ears the frantic static of a sound above pitch the intolerable my life the love part of life had sunk like a slaughtered body wrapped in cement and thrown overboard. My life it died at birth love for me was a still-birth and as I listened to his pleas it resonated a visceral shock to my insides long emptied of this kind of longing a matter of survival a matter of facing myself in the mirror a matter of being able to sleep at night a matter of no longer longing for my suicide. And here within earshot is my son moaning and sobbing and begging, *don't hang up please don't hang up*, his frail winged arms held tight against him as he stared glazed at the computer face. He lost love his first love his defining love the love of his first sexual encounter the love that he handled with a grace and devotion unrivalled by most mature men.

I supplied the condoms initially and then he took over. He set moods and music and videos and food and asked me to change the sheets. I was privy to their intimacy and knowing how precious and rare a fearlessness of love is I played my part was a willing accomplice. My only interference was to suggest that *squeakme* go for birth control and for a gynecological exam. She didn't that I know of. The only intimation that it would end in disaster and distress was that although she sported an incredible contemporary silver ring with a diamond a gift from my son she told her family she found it and always just referred to my son as *only a friend*. He did not disabuse the deception those were the terms. She was there before the illness struck she was there throughout the illness and the three surgeries and then abruptly pulled the plug just as he was in a healing process. She threw a wrench in his capacity to get well she tossed him over and into the dung heap of despair. And he immobilized by his need to restrain his body had no resources to go after her she plainly had had enough. Looking back I see she was painting a self-portrait of selflessness of a kind of nurse Nightingale complex for which she got kudos wherever she went *what a saint what a marvel what a girl to stick by her man through thick and through thin. She even let me make love to her with a bag with a bag* the subtext the unfathomable.

She got fucked she got satisfaction she got laid and to pay for it without others knowing deflecting from her true involvement with him she flew above him with angel wings just like Emma Thompson in the TV version of *Angels in America*. This little guy who bought a rose for his 6th grade love on Valentines day this guy who bought his girlfriend a corsage that perfectly matched her 8th grade prom and graduation gown and who rented a limousine to drive around after the school dance and this guy of mine who knew romance and courting better than any husband or boyfriend I have had. This guy screaming pleading begging wailing *don't hang up, I lived for you, I waited for you all day or week all month just come over for a half an hour* this well after midnight. This *Squeak me* did comply and stayed for exactly a half hour and then pretending to resist the \$20.00 cab fare she readily took from my outstretched hand.

Passover Surgery, Holiday Festivities at Hospitals, Multinational Celebrations and Clowns from the *Big Apple Circus* 2005

Inevitability is always mythic. Week after week the dreary end months of winter we visited the surgeon and the internist whose brows wrinkled and sent us home with versions of diaper cream one you could get off the net. Drink milkshakes stay hydrated and call if necessary. My little caved-in bird and I would lurch off to the prematurely darkened streets search a cab and return home to baths and pain to refusals for food to a lockdown of his butt the searing pain too great to let excrement out. Meanwhile the little hub on his tummy would continue to leak not heal not close up leak and occasional poop very liquid like muddied waters would escape drooling down his tummy. In the darkened room TV the essential voice in the house and the baths the endless baths. Having by necessity returned to work full time I said rather starkly, *you can go to Daddy's house he's around more often but Luca I can't stay home with you I need to keep this job we need to keep this job*. He seemed to understand until in July 2005 I got an ominous letter from him to be shared later in this narrative. I was back to double entendres at work *Luca's good he's holding his own* I would respond to the muted queries. But to the boss *at any moment I will take off with my kitten, my soul, my son and we will rest on a Caribbean Beach languishing the time until his breath is as still as the moments before the late afternoon rains*.

On one of those ominous desperate visits to the doctor, he insisted that Luca go immediately to the hospital. He was desperately dehydrated and feverish and frail. The diaper medicine wasn't the panacea he had hoped. Back in our cozy home in the pediatric unit of Mt. Sinai, the nurses all greeted us with the familiar over stated exuberance and warmth that belied the horrified looks on their faces at Luca's much deteriorated condition. They had last seen him after the bag was removed and he was off to a happy prosperous life, tennis pro they could say they knew. They only assigned nurses' who had previously worked with Luca. And when I said he had to sit in a bath they immediately cleaned out the bathtub, which I gather was used for soaking soiled bedclothes. And as if the rooms in the hospital were a blur as if we were in a zone of our own, Luca scurried to the tub with the frequency he had at home. No one flinched the accommodations were made, this was the kid they had seen moments from a fade out when he had first arrived before his colon was removed and now they had him back. Of

course I was the nurse the baton holder leading the race by his side, nursing became second nature it is what a mother does without flinching in this aggravated place and situation. After hydrating him for a week and dosing him with antibiotics he was let to leave. Back to the room back to the pain back to the bunching of toes and the hot baths back to holding back his poop and forcing to leak through the little knob on his tummy, the inadvertent escape valve. Each day on the subway I thought more and more about our escape about the beach about how we would meet this collision course to death.

The surgeon had a plan greater than diaper cream; he decided that Luca would be put on 12 hours a day of liquid food to give his bowels a rest. The food would be delivered in heaping what plastic packs and be stored in the refrigerator. Luca moved to Frank's for this part of the journey. After the debacle in the hospital when Frank tossed me around on a hostility that kept me from learning how to use IV medication with Luca, this after he was returning home after he had gotten a bag. It was retribution it was I was frozen in time and reluctant to take on a job that Frank did with such relish his son now completely in his mercy as dependent as an infant on life support. Each day for the 11 or so days Luca relented to the tube in his arm and the food being dribbled in, I stayed with him for the early hours of evening while Frank went out with his girlfriend for dinner. Luca seemed to be gaining weight and tolerating this way of life. Amazing how we acclimate to the most absurd and stunning machinations of science the science of maintaining a life.

It was right after Valentine's dinner Frank and his girlfriend love drench love birds came back my vigil over. Luca now being feed intravenously through a *Picc-Line* from mammoth bags of a chilled white liquid delivered daily that would drip by drip enter his body Luca making it seem tolerable if with rhythmic winces as each chilled bit entered his blood stream. Frank and I agreed that Luca would stay at his house during this time Frank being around more. At about midnight I got a call that Luca had a 104 fever. I had noticed he was hot and had mentioned that to Luca and Frank before I left but Luca was reluctant understandably to have his temperature taken. Luca feared he would lose his focus and tolerance for the creamy white food that was entering him. Frank called the doctor who said to go immediately to pediatric emergency at Mount Sinai. I would meet him there. And who should arrive through the revolving door, a trio, Luca more upright these days Frank, and his girlfriend. I flew off the handle and demanded she leave Luca looking upset at the stir Frank's fear of being caught the bad boy the bad decision maker surfaced and she skittered out. *How could you bring your girlfriend at a moment when we as a family may have incredible decisions to make?* Muttering to myself *this guy has a way of bringing women he fucks around at all the wrong times and places.* It's a habit it's a statement it was the reason for the divorce.

Luca was admitted quickly to the hospital flooded through the same *Picc Line* with antibiotics. Our trusted surgeon was out of town and his on-call was a crusty older South African who wanted immediately to operate and put back the bag. This signifier a defeat on the most monumental level it wasn't part of our master plan that of life if without a colon without as well an external bag. The *Doctor Caligari* disruptor was practically thrown out of the room by Luca who later reported to his own surgeon that that doctor didn't treat him with respect. Dosed handily with antibiotics we left Luca moving back

home with me back to his room and pain the great antidote overly hot baths with constantly running water but the deterioration ascendant monumental this time we were skidding off the shoot of life in exponential time. Poop was now oozing and pouring out of his tummy he was again a heap of bones curled into himself only a few days into this excruciating turn of events and I called his internist. Much of the last months were attempts by the doctors to use diagnostic tools to assess medically what was going on. Buffeted vigorously Luca refused to have any diagnostic test not a *Cat Scan* not an *MRI* not in the hospital not as an outpatient after about ten tries even to sit in rooms adjacent to such machines Luca's refusal was final and adamant he just couldn't wouldn't do it. It was attributable to posttraumatic stress he had had one test too many at NYU.

This is where the story gets unpacked. Frank voice raised tintinnabulation Hitlerian wanted to clamp Luca into restraints shove him into an ambulance to get the tests done this as we reached crisis proportion. Frank was freaking panicking. Luca and I rose up balked and refused. Luca and I now called the doctor his now loved and trusted internist who against all odds had taken child Luca on if an adult internist even to the midnight hour at the request of the floundering frightened and desperate NYU doctor. At Luca's insistence I called to share with him the current high stakes situation when he asked to speak to Luca this was the night before the eve of Passover and our internist yarmulke and all was strictly *observant*. *No, I won't come to the hospital to have a Cat Scan then I will stay at home I won't come back to the hospital I'll just stay here* implying die here. We weren't going to make it to a Caribbean Beach. *I live on Fifth Avenue* I overheard Luca giving out the address then hanging up he was in my bed. *What's that I ask? Oh Doctor K. is coming over at 8:30 tonight* he informed me. I put it out of my mind thinking it was wishful thinking Luca so loving and trusting of him. Sure enough at precisely 8:30 pm a tall gangly guy over 6'2" appeared yarmulke and all.

Where's Luca he asked. I showed him to my room. He looked around quickly and asked *who's the artist? Friends* I answered. And then he pulled up the rocking chair close as it could come to where Luca was lying and they mumbled I couldn't make out what they were saying the door just ajar. I was sure it was about TV and life and choices. Finally he suggested to Luca that if he wanted he could come to the hospital by cab the next day around 1 pm where he and the older crusty surgeon would be waiting our own surgeon being out of town. If pressured by a early Passover sunset he promised he would tell the surgeon doctor what to do that being to just drain the hub the very busy hub on Luca's tummy leaving after leaning over to embrace some 45 minutes later. As the door closed the doctor giving my hand a reassuring clasp belonged now to legend and myth.

The night before the doctor had come over Luca stood in the shower as I endlessly and rhythmically swashed him down poop was pouring out of his tummy and out of his butt and running down legs that looked more skeletal than real. He had that half whimsy look on his face as I swashed and swashed. How did we get to here? In the most luminescent indomitable way I stepped into what I imagined as archetype mother. I felt the universality the timelessness in my hands my attentive eyes my calm almost playful demeanor. Luca and I had normalized this almost ritualized endeavor and continued condition unchanged the next night after the doctor's visit. Luca mulling secretly and

silently to himself whether to just stay on in my bed lifting out intermittently for these swiping down showers or go to the hospital the next day where the doctor and the much disliked surgeon would be waiting. Never fully informed by Luca or the doctor that it had been left as Luca's choice in Luca's sole purview. Having updated Frank about the doctor's visit to our home and that we were to meet him at the hospital at 1pm the next day Frank dutifully appearing at 12:30. Luca spent the night and early morning weighing what was truly his own life and death decision the unwieldy nature of it not fully known or reckoned by us. He lifted off the bed and with an arm around each of our shoulders walked out the door into the elevator passing the lobby security guard Rosie whose expression reflected such a deep sadness and then into a cab to the next leg of this odyssey.

The untoward kicks in and all the promises Dr. K. made didn't stop the hand of fate. After the doctor friend left for Passover the older crusty doctor told Luca *I am going to do what I have to we are preparing you for surgery now and I may have to give you a bag again*. This time nothing could couch the force of the blow Luca knew he was defeated. He had tried valiantly to live compromised and failed his butt simply could not serve as the channel of elimination. Within hours Luca was in surgery Frank took the first shift in the family surgical waiting room for the protocol-limned call from the surgeon. I went to Hanratty's the local pub restaurant to have a stiff vodka martini and a well-done hamburger. As I waved goodbye to Luc as he entered the operating room I felt the Caribbean beach slipping away it was to be the New York streets or nothing. Four or five hours later after Frank had his alcohol-less meal we were found sitting near each other talking about nothing when the doctor appeared no phone call we had always gotten calls. And in this ancillary waiting room where the forbidden is said out loud as in *your wife has had both breasts removed the cancer has metastasized* this to the man sitting next to us. Enters the older crusty senior surgeon one of the proclaimed inventors of the internal "j pouch" or the internal reconstructed colon sat down next to us and said, *the surgery went well he is in recovery but can return to a regular room in the pediatric unit that's where he told me he wanted to go before the surgery. He has a bag again but the bad news I'm afraid is that he has a serious case of what looks like crones disease in his rectum and more than likely will have to wear a bag for the rest of his life*. I listened trembling with relief that Luca was alive and didn't even have to go to critical care and Frank started wailing. *No no no this cannot be he is going to be a great tennis star this cannot happen* his grief his desire for his son's tennis career collided in a barrage of unfortunate refusals and denials. The doctor sternly advising Frank *don't go to see him until you can pull yourself together. He is not to know this but will know I will tell him he just needs to give his butt a rest. This is not the time for him to think about anything but getting well and getting on with his life*. With this the surgeon left. Frank moved off to the side to sob. I did not comfort him. I wept a little myself knowing that my boy my pride my baby my found *Native American White* was alive and that I would soon see him again to swap jokes to feel infuriated to feel the pain of another failed marriage mostly flooded over with a moment of triumphant motherhood.

Luca returned from the hospital with a poop bag once more. He seemed more sanguine about the inevitable. He was no longer in pain. He could eat and eliminate without even

noticing it going on. He had to learn once again timing, timing of when to empty the bag about when to think about it. This time at nearly 17 he managed everything on his own. He seemed to take pleasure preparing the bag and watching as the hole for the stoma shrunk. There were daily reminders that he pooped into an external prop when changing the remnants placed in a tightly knotted garbage bag waiting to be discarded and the occasional spill over on bed sheets. As time moved on he for the most part threw out the garbage bags leaving me to reorder and replenish the necessary ostomy supplies the stock always available and ready this to be my responsibility to the future.

Friends came over. Laughter spilled from under his door. He bought an X-Box that was connected wirelessly to the computer with a headset like a pilot he played and argued across the Internet playing primarily violent games but not in solitude. Soon he disappeared afternoons to his friend Matt's house, Matt who had been a friend since they were six. Matt's house was very relaxed loving and welcoming to Luca they only asked what they should buy him to eat. First Luca took cabs back and forth then a cross-town bus occasionally and then a bike. Luca didn't want to use his mountain bike stored in the basement he wanted an *in the hood* bike sturdy for riding the City streets but rigged to do bike tricks. My boy was on his way back to general health and mischief. He often came home smelling smoky most likely from joints cigarettes and god knows what else from out there. *Nick's mother is a psychiatrist and she gives him Ritalin* he tells me. His friend Will drove *he couldn't be a bad guy his father worked for the Times* this qualifier for a friend who stood on shaky ground. *Will had no friends until he had a car* the principal of their school told me. These were friendships particularly reflective of the life of a *normal* New York City 17 year old. Luca biked everywhere searching out corners where he could catch a glimpse of or have some conversation with Sarah. *We don't chill and don't talk that much* he informed me. One day after work I found the two of them silent in his room.

Luca's appetite picked up he was starting to put some meat on his still thinly concealed skeletal frame. *After I had my first joint at Matt's I started to eat* he informed me casually. *Reporting this to the doctor* who encouraged Luca to keep puffing warning *but don't get caught smoking reefer on a corner*. He wondered if Luca wanted him to provide a prescription for medical marijuana. Luca declined pot became part of his link to friendships as well as to food and eating. Laughing to myself that I had warned Rebecca and Jeremy when teenagers that if they smoked pot I would go to Family Court and have them placed in a rehab with locked doors how life had changed me.

Luca would call me to ask when I was coming home from work requesting that I buy him some favorite dish for dinner or some other treat. In actual fact he wanted to time my coming with the exiting of the daily slew of kids who joined him because *our house is so relaxed* he would inform me after they had gone. I would fill the refrigerator with frozen pizzas Hot Pockets juices sodas and snack bars which would last for three or four days. Luca would not eat most of it after a time I got to know who had come over by the foods eaten. E-mail was on constantly Luca checking like a bird pecking a seed or worm in the ground. I noticed new e-names seemed like girls. He was building back up and reaching

out beyond his body. I could yell again and curse him out when he didn't call home or came in very late. His *I'm sorry* was too facile it worried me. Luca had mastered the art of fibbing long before getting sick his stories always appearing completely forthright and aboveboard.

On his 17th birthday he invited over 17 friends and asked that I not come home until 1:30 am. I obliged stayed at Rebecca and Craig's apartment they were away. I filled the refrigerator with drinks and the freezer with pizzas and provided bags of pretzels and chips. Luca needed to constantly munch on pretzels for the salt content, which served to stem the flow out of his body. He refused to take Imodium to help control the flow except when absolutely necessary refused to take vitamins wanting nothing that even reminded him of medicines. His Dr. K. was thrilled with his progress and wanted him to get back on the court. Luca refused physical therapy. He wanted to build back normally. He says he will return to tennis but I think he is still working that through. *When I get rid of the bag, you can't be a champ on the tour with a bag* he told me recently. Listening closely having eerie intimations that he might have a bag for the rest of his life. Reverberations play back the ominous words of the surgeon about the possibility of Crohn's Disease attacking his rectum thereby making it impossible to use. I think there are always miracle drugs and medical advances particularly when there are groups actively lobbying as for Ulcerative Colitis and Crone's Disease most often affecting Europeans and Jews.

Luca's fate has been taken over by him I reside more and more on the sidelines as it should be. I suggest he finish high school and then go to Santa Monica Community College in California living somewhere near Jeremy then transferring to Santa Barbara situated near the Pacific Ocean which had a terrific tennis team and lots of parties. That suits well with him. Luca attends summer school missing one day partying a lot coming in late sleeping little and winding up with a D on an essay about *The Grapes of Wrath*. Luca seemed more and more like his old take it or leave it school self-social life has become central understandably. He tells me he is not ready for a serious girl friend. I can understand.

On my 65th birthday, July 17th he said we would go to have brunch and maybe a movie *Hustle and Flow*, for which Jeremy was an agent. He was busy running back and forth from the computer to the wireless X Box game the day moved on. I asked what he had on his mind muttered a weak but serious warning about not abusing drugs. He provoked some kind of a fight and took away his offer to celebrate my birthday. We had become accustomed to catching up at the Metro a Greek diner on the West Side sharing platters of chicken fingers or calamari. The day was looking ominous he said I'm going out and I'm not coming back and slammed around the house. I lay supine on my bed watching CNN Headlines. And finally the door slammed shut he had his bike his backpack and said he had money although I shoved \$20.00 his way as he left. The following note sitting by the computer:

I'm leaving I don't think I'm going to come back. I had plans to do stuff with you today but when you started talking about me doing drugs that was it. In some ways I

really think you tried to kill me or just to make it worse. I have my reasons for thinking that. Thanks for letting me stay here but I over stayed my welcome. I love you mom but this is not going to work,

Your son, Luca

Don't worry I have money saved so I'll be fine. This is for my own good.

Often I had suggested or asserted rather that he was not to smoke dope or use any other drug with his friends when they were here. I began to believe that he was smoking pot in excess of any help it brought to enhancing his appetite. I had misread our easiness with each other I had crossed some prohibitive line with my warning. Luca's accusation that I had tried to kill him scorching I lost my ability to breath. My heart wrenched leapt about a wild fish hurling on a line. I e-mailed him and said that I needed to know the genesis of that that awful accusation. Days later he let me know although he had returned home inevitably that night if after twelve. *You left me alone all those days when I had pain and was all by myself. You don't know how that felt. And then at times when I asked you to leave my room you wouldn't. You did come to Daddy's every night when I was getting that food. You did tell me you had to work that we needed the money but you left me like that every day.*

If there is a moment that is irreconcilable this was it. Few things in my life made sense to me but my care of Luca during his illness seemed constant and real and now it was challenged. Knowing nothing is clean and clear I tried to go on from there. Luca and shared more Metro diner meals and some good laughs. I bought him treats to let him know when I was arriving home from work. But my heart changed. A story is personal when accounting experiences versions of actions and incidents contradict and fall so differently Luca had once again excruciating pain and felt abandoned if after nearly three years of part time work and night time vigils. I needed to get back to work to keep us economically solvent and he felt at a crisis moment that he was abandoned by me.

It's not true, yes, it is true, it is true and it's not true, there is silence and there is not silence, there is no one and there is someone, nothing prevents anything. Samuel Beckett.

The Door of the Plane Once More - July 31, 2005

He needs fantasies my boss tells me. Frank has been dying to take him on a vacation. They have good memories of trips to Brazil and the Adirondacks. Frank thinks he might take him to Europe I am fully supportive. Luca says yes picks Amsterdam Berlin, and Paris the locations where they filmed *Ocean's Eleven*. Summer school would be over in a quick month. Two days after the close of summer school Luca mounts a plane with his father bound for Amsterdam. Luca calls from the seat to say goodbye. I didn't know if he would actually get on. After the click of the phone I held my sides tears ran from my eyes I was back on the plane in Paraguay as it lifted off and I watched the snaking Amazon. Doors open planes take off the in-between times vanish in a tuft of clouds they lift up maybe even heavenward. We had done ample research and checked with the doctor about flying and the tending to an ostomy bag. Luca had a letter of explanation

from his doctor for security and flight crew and in the event of a medical incident for local doctors.

Luca called from Amsterdam and then Berlin. He adored Amsterdam *the people are nice it is really pretty and there is marijuana everywhere just kidding* he says. Berlin is not as much fun. Daddy is good to travel with. *When you finish high school if you want I'll treat you to a trip to Europe and you can travel with friends.* He liked that. The calls were simple and informal just to check in.

My body is still weary my mind taut strained by the level of acuity required. *Daddy travels well he is fun on a trip* I had told Luca. I remembered our trips Frank and mine filled with adventure and a meanness that defies definition. Frank berated to keep control to assuage his hunger to feel entitled if the places we visited in Italy England and Frank were always quite lovely spectacular. Our history rested in a series of trips this before we took in our found child. *Take off your top he urged* at the side of a river in the Dordogne. *No* I said and didn't. The rest is writ in tablets of memory and perception no more room for interplay negotiating a word or an image.

February 2006 near An End - Where is the Open Door?

In the fog of sorrow I try to recognize this child. There he is the little boy of temper tantrums the **genius child* as in Langston Hughes the stallion untrained who needed to be run and run and run he is the boy in a cape who would bound around on the furniture as if gravity had no pull, he is the boy high up in trees he is the boy of blocks and towers he could not part with break down he is the boy of gun play dress up and wild laughter. He is the boy who folded within my breasts and belly night after night and we breathed as one. He is the boy prematurely without front teeth whose first ones rotted out from too much Playtex nipple and too much apple juice and too little calcium while in uteri. He was my inevitability. His father my cross to bear the lynchpin the wished for key to unleash my sexuality the price a plunder of my soul. This sex god jabbed me as if with hot irons ridiculing particularizing every aspect of my being. I have burns no salve can soothe. This is the boy found in a nether world of Paraguayan corruption and black market politics where *Josef Mengele (Nazi SS Officer and Physician at Auschwitz Concentration Camp known as the Angel of Death)* and every other ignoble creature in the universe found safe harbor. This is the boy of my misguided sexual politics. This is the boy who when he found a tennis court found a home. And when he found a tennis coach he found a mother and a father. This is the boy who woke up just moments from his 13th birthday, the 8th ranked tennis player for boys 16 and found himself at fifteen without a colon in intensive care tossed into the inferno of catastrophic illness in hand-to-hand combat with death for the next two years.

This is a song for the genius child.
Sing it softly, for the song is wild.
Sing it softly as ever you can -
Lest the song get out of hand.

Nobody loves a genius child.

Can you love an eagle,
Tame or wild?
Can you love an eagle,
Wild or tame?
Can you love a monster
Of frightening name?

Nobody loves a genius child.

Kill him - and let his soul run wild.

Langston Hughes

Why did I expect when he was 17 walking around with a stoma and a bag into which his poop just flowed and flowed to pick up and go to school? Why did I think he could just pick up where he left off? Why couldn't I find my way to who he was now and help him prick the darkness and come up with a way to get to the other side? So where are we gathering facts taking inventory? He smokes weed regularly he has a dark nether life I don't know but can only imagine he waits on the corner of his high school for friends at lunch and after school but won't venture inside. School was never a strong card but he found a way to make it work but not now. School is over for me! I got my ways of earning money...*blah, blah, blah* shouts and tantrums. He is between 2 and 13 I say to myself as he roughs me up. I have his finger marks on me like a tattoo.

He has faced death and won. He is as scrubbed and innocent as the day I came to adopt him at nine weeks already robbed of innocence languishing nearly listless in a military secured adoption agency babies bound fed wrong formula guarded by soldiers with guns.

Now when he walks away I sink to my knees but no prayer comes out I am questions and despair. Little viable is left of me death hovers a wish and a dilemma. How to protect him and keep him safe? How to give him the courage to face and express his rightful rage? Where is the open door this time?

You don't help me he chanted over and over you don't help me...

My body did not block the disease my heart did not stop the agony. I am Mary holding the child of god still with breath there is still hope he will not be crucified unless his father and I kill him off with our hatred for each other. Fury lashes out at my weak body, my ill-informed sexual desires with constant attempts to suppress and extinguish the all of it. Luca's father inflames struts and prances (*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player That struts and frets his hour upon the stage...Macbeth, Shakespeare*) penis erect exciting and luring multiple women aggressively encouraging inappropriately prematurely his son's sexual proclivities. Once again a girl friend tells Frank what to do whom to be. Once again he blends and merges with another life as if he were just born without history a **Zelig* with vengeance. (*Zelig is an ordinary person who can change himself or herself to imitate anyone they are near.*)

My kid has just walked out the door it is a Sunday afternoon around 4:30 there is a wind chill warning I sip scotch and listen to *Claude Bolling, Suite for Flute and Jazz Piano*. Where to put the grief? Where to release the sobs? How to confront my truths and retrieve find again the good mother within? I am a rendering of The Pieta with son who fought to be kept alive becoming my savior my salvation now looking toward me to help him find his good life.

This Narrative Account was written in the form of a diary or journal and follows events that are more than likely chronicled in medical records. It was written by me on behalf of Frank and Luca as well, each of who has read this document. It was prepared to be read by lawyers as we assessed if there was a plausible and winnable lawsuit and if we in the end wanted to pursue that avenue if opened to us.

**A Narrative Account of the Illness of Luca Pignatelli from February 2003-July 2003.
Prepared by his Mother Naomi Barber**

The following is a narrative account of the course of Luca's illness. It is the first phase in determining whether or not there is a basis for a lawsuit against Dr. B., Luca's pediatric gastroenterologist and NYU hospital. We are fully prepared to cooperate in obtaining hospital and physician records and to provide a more detailed narrative should the next phase of a lawsuit be pursued. As much as we liked and trusted Dr. B., we believe he betrayed that trust in him and that Luca under his care and at NYU almost died, and we believe that it was the misguided treatment of the ulcerative colitis that nearly killed him.

I believe that hospital records will prove that to be the case. A total lack of cohesion at NYU and bad medical judgment almost led to the near death of our son Luca to say nothing of the almost unendurable prolonged agony and suffering, and life endangering weight loss which he endured.

From February 21 until the evening of May 8, 2003 Luca was a patient at NYU Hospital – at which time, he was transferred to Mt. Sinai and after some prepping for an operation including blood transfusions had emergency surgery to remove his colon in the early afternoon of May 9th. After surgery, he spent more than a week in intensive care, and had a number of “medical bumps in the road because he was so gravely ill prior to the surgery” as the doctors’ on the surgical team would warn which impeded a more rapid recovery from the surgery to remove his colon. They included: explosive vomiting of bile, ongoing fevers and high white count, being put back on breathing support in intensive care, feeding tubes for nutrition (Picc Line), 28 days on intensive, antibiotic treatment including ten days when returning home. He remained hospitalized until May 27th and then had home nursing care. The reason for the surgery was a fulminating, septic, perforated colon which “practically fell apart in our hands” according to one of the surgical team. The pathology report is on record at Mt Sinai.

Since the surgery, the following gets replayed constantly in our minds:

•What is a more uneventful, predictable course of recovery after the removal of a colon, particularly in a strong, fit, young athlete and person?

•Why wasn't there a colonoscopy given when Luca was admitted to NYU hospital with 105 fever on February 21, 2003? *Note: Luca had been given a colonoscopy a year earlier in February 2002, when the ulcerative colitis was first diagnosed. We had prior to February 21, for about three or four weeks, been calling and visiting our pediatrician, Dr. Kessler and Dr. Bangaroo because Luca had been having severe stomach pains, blood in his stool, going very frequently to the bathroom, and most significantly running fevers nearly daily between 101 and 103. Dr. Kessler has been his doctor since he was an infant and had referred us initially to Dr. B. the pediatric gastroenterologist who had been treating Luca since the onset of the disease and who is on the faculty at NYU medical school. Luca had started having sporadic school attendance, the principal even called to ask why he looked so terrible. (During the first bout of ulcerative colitis in February 2002, he ran a high fever once or twice including once at 105 but for the most part was fever free. And although Luca, when sick in the past had run high fevers, he had been well for a substantially long time, prior to the first attack of ulcerative colitis - which may have been triggered by an undiagnosed case of Giardia. It is possible to get school attendance records for this period and a record of visits and calls to Doctor K. and Dr. B. for the time period in the early weeks of February 2003. We were experiencing mounting concern, and Luca while suffering was bravely trying to keep up commitments to school and tennis.*

- During the first three-week stay at NYU after being admitted through the emergency room with a 105 fever to which Dr. B. said to bring

him. Luca was getting progressively sicker, losing weight, experiencing intensifying pains for which the staff would apply endless warm wet compresses, frequent putrid blood filled stools the stench of which would make him gag covering his face and forcing him to flee the bathroom on his very wobbly legs attached to intravenous tubes. He developed an increasing aversion to the frequent needles used to draw blood, was scared all of the time anticipating what tests or treatments were next, and hid his face when people would come to see him because of the expressions he saw in their faces and eyes. His stomach was not only burnt and discolored, from the heating pad, but also obviously distended and incredibly painful when it was touched. Luca could only tolerate his doctor and a resident to examine his stomach.

His fevers persisted, getting up to 104, two days would pass fever free and then it would spike, there was almost a recognizable pattern to the fevers. Luca was subjected to a myriad of tests for the fever, which appeared to be mysterious to everyone, and there was even a suspicion of appendicitis. **Never did anyone suggest that the symptoms were all related to a fulminating, perforating colon or a case of ulcerative colitis that could only be cured by surgery.** Luca was miserable and still hoping to get back to a normal life and wanting to be home, in other words wanting the whole thing to go away. He would protest loudly about wanting to go home because neither he nor either of us was informed about the gravity of the illness. Some of the staff said that they found him difficult because it was so hard for him to let them examine him and he persisted in questioning. *What the treatment was for, how it would feel, what the aftermath would be, and what the side effects were?* It was this questioning that I believe along with his athlete's discipline that kept him alive during this time. He was obviously failing and dying and our question is: **Why didn't anyone call a halt to all of these tests and treatments attribute the symptoms to a case of ulcerative colitis in which the colon had to be removed immediately – not six or eight weeks hence. At the least a colonoscopy could have given right after he was admitted to the hospital on February 21st.**

When he was fever free for two days, he was sent home. By now he was barely 100 pounds and still having pain and going to the bathroom frequently and still having bloody stools and unable to eat. He could barely walk, he was so weak. Before his first admission we had tried going to an internist, with the approval of Dr. B. who performed acupuncture, Luca was willing to try anything to abate the symptoms. With concern he suggested to Luca that he drink a supplement like *Nutrament* to give his body some substance. Later I became aware that Luca couldn't absorb much food or drink because

his colon was falling apart and not functioning in the way necessary for food intake. Luca developed wide-ranging food desires because of a mental hunger but seemed unable to take more than a bite or two of any of them. By the time his colon was removed there must have been hundreds of dollars spent trying to appease these almost excessive hungers. Luca's mind was suggesting foods that would spark an appetite but the sad fact is he could barely eat anything because of the pains and nausea and the fact, still unknown to us, that his digestive system could not adequately transform the food into calorie bearing, life sustaining nutrients.

When at home, in this interim stay from the hospital, which lasted for about a week, Luca was getting increasingly sicker and could hardly get out of bed except to take steaming baths to relieve the intense pains. He constantly held a hot heating pad on his stomach, which seemed to relieve the intense stomach cramping. He also seemed to get some relief from the frequent excessively hot baths. Pain medication we were told by Dr. B. was counter-indicated with ulcerative colitis, therefore no medical relief was possible. His stomach was getting burnt and noticeably discolored but it was the only way for him to get some relief. We kept calling and going to the Dr. Bangaroo (refer to his records) and going for blood tests, and Luca was getting thinner and thinner and could hardly eat or drink anything but Powerade. And he developed a new symptom, spitting constantly spitting, uncontrollably spitting. He couldn't be left alone even to go to the store. Finally one night, after he took a bath and came out, while I was standing nearby by he became as stiff as a board and fell backward unconscious. I grabbed him but not before he banged his head and back on the toilet and the sink. I started screaming, put him into my bed and decided to wait until the morning because he came to and I thought it might have been from his weakness and the steamy bath. We had an appointment with Dr. B. at his office in the hospital the next day in the morning. I thought it was not a good idea to sit for hours in an emergency room when we were going to the Doctor in the morning. After being readmitted, one of the infectious disease team at NYU who was familiar with Luca from our last stay a week ago told me that I had made the right decision not to return this time to the hospital through the emergency room.

Upon seeing Luca and watching him spit and weighing and discovering he was hardly 90 pounds, Dr. B. had him readmitted to the hospital. The date was March 21, 2003 (check records for precise dates). This was the morning after he had passed out. By now he looked, *Third World, a doctor friend would say after seeing him early that morning with the members of his tennis team.* He was alarming to look at and his symptoms were worse than ever but new ones:

dramatic weight loss, constant spitting, extended tender stomach, excessive pains, a mouth filled with sores, and frequent stools with blood. His basic vitality was so compromised a member of the infectious disease team at NYU when seeing him again said he was at: ***the dangerous tipping point, like in the third world when the body starts eating itself up and there is no way to save the person.*** All this while we had been in constant contact with Doctor B, fully cooperating, feeling frightened and feeling responsible for his increasing weakness and suffering.

It is obvious to me that he should never have gone home while he was so sick in the first place. It was a Thursday, and it took almost two days to have a *Picc Line* inserted for him to receive necessary life-saving nutrition. And it was only after being in the hospital about a week-and-a-half, that he was given an endoscopy from which they discovered a thick, dangerous white fungus covering his esophagus and attributed the raging ongoing fevers to this fungal infection which could have resulted from all of the steroids Luca was receiving. Test results showed Luca was experiencing the onset of liver dysfunction and/or failure. **Given the level of the spitting along with the other intensifying symptoms, it is a wonder why they waited a week-and-a-half for the endoscopy and still no colonoscopy was performed.** For more precise information, hospital records can be checked.

•Why was he sent home after the first period of time? in the hospital when he was only fever free for a day or two and obviously failing? Why at this point did no one suggest that the ulcerative colitis was responsible for the fevers and the symptoms pointing to the fact that the only recourse was to remove the colon? We would never have objected to such a recommendation if it were going to help or cure Luca.

From February 21 until May 8th, the second admission, we were at NYU hospital under the care of Dr. B. given tests and treatments while it was apparent that Luca's basic general well being was failing and being compromised. Luca was being administered a daily dose of a very potentially dangerous medication to cure the fungus in the esophagus. The first medication tested provoked a severe negative reaction in Luca. Thereby given a medication he seemed to tolerate better. Every night for more than two hours he had to lie still while this medication dripped into his body through his *Picc line*. We were told to watch closely for any adverse reactions from Luca. (Another cliff hanger here.) And then in contention, following a second endoscopy on May 7th, when Dr. B. found the fungus to be gone and subsequently clearly informed us that there would be no more need of the specific medicine. A colonoscopy was also performed at the same time as the endoscopy on the morning of May 7th. The infectious disease team seeming to overrule Dr. Bangaroo ordered one last dose of the medicine. There was a heated discussion and vehement protests on my part but I was powerless to stop them

from giving Luca the said medication. *We want to be sure we are rid of it* or something of that nature was told me. During the course of this *final dose* Luca experienced a severe, frightening physical traumatic reaction to the medication and needed intensive medical intervention and swift action on the part of the house medical team. Luca started shaking violently said he felt unbearably cold, and nearly skeletal seemed to be jumping all over the bed and I believe his fever spiked. His blood pressure apparently had tumbled and Demerol was immediately administered. When informed of the situation the following day, Dr. B. said that there had been a miscommunication with the infectious disease team. On May 8, the day of our transfer, the head of the infectious disease team, Dr. P., came to talk to me with the member of the staff with whom I had had the heated discussion protesting the last dose of the said medication it seemed trying to appease me and placate her. ***I told him voice raised fist clenched that I felt powerless to protect my son from the doctor and his team when he asked gingerly at whom and why I was so angry.***

Luca also received the medication Remicade about two weeks after his second hospital admission (exact dates will have to be garnered from hospital records.) Dr. B. told us it was known as a miracle drug for Crohn's disease, which is in the same family of diseases as ulcerative colitis but was yet proven to be effective with ulcerative colitis. He told us about some frightening side effects, like tuberculosis, all of which could be provoked by the medication and therefore treatable medically. Luca agreed to try the Remicade after extensive questioning about the side effects. It was administered during a more than two-hour period on or about March 8, 2003. The medication seemed to abate some of the external difficult symptoms like the endless cramping and going many multiple times of day to the bathroom. **It turns out that the medication possibly Remicade masked some of the external symptoms but in fact could have been responsible for the further deterioration of Luca's condition because the ulcerative colitis was getting worse and worse, digging deeper into the subcutaneous walls of the colon, discovered through both a colonoscopy and nuclear medical testing during May 7 and 8, precipitating our immediate transfer to Mt. Sinai and the emergency surgery.** Post surgery we would ultimately learn that Luca's colon by that point in time was disintegrating and septic. It is painfully obvious to us now in retrospect that everything that Luca endured for the testing and treatment of the ulcerative colitis while at NYU was prolonging the inevitable need to have his colon removed and thereby compromising Luca's well-being and in fact, life. *(Note: In a final conversation with Dr. B. who called after Luca came home (May 27, 2003) from Mt. Sinai, he said that he was writing an article about the use and failure of Remicade in the treatment of ulcerative colitis. Dr. B. also said that he was in possession of the pathology report from Mt. Sinai.)*

At Mt. Sinai, we were clearly consistently and continually informed about how very gravely ill Luca was when he arrived at Mt. Sinai necessitating emergency surgery to remove his colon and further learned that intensive antibiotic and other medical interventions had to be administered to keep him alive following the surgery because of the level of infection in his body and his very compromised physical state. We were told that the post-operative care could possibly be lengthy and that it could potentially be filled with difficult medical and physical *bumps in the road*. **We constantly question**

how did it happen after such a long and medically intense period of time of unbelievable prolonged suffering for Luca at NYU that when referred to a medical/surgical/ infectious disease team at Mt. Sinai we arrived with a dying child who possibly could not have survived the surgery to remove his colon or if, more horribly, he had not had the surgery on May 9th could actually have died? Again, how did he get this gravely ill, in a life and death struggle with ulcerative colitis, when we were at a hospital getting treated? Why didn't they do a colonoscopy immediately upon admittance at NYU on or about February 21st and discover Luca's colon to be already beyond saving, perhaps already diagnosable as fulminating and septic? I believe that from the onset of this round of ulcerative colitis, in February 2003, Luca should have had his colon out. Then he would have had a recovery that was more minimal and directly related to a recovery from the surgery to remove his colon. It would be good to know what a more uneventful course of recovery is post colon removal particularly for someone who was young and fit.

Luca's person and character was in full display as he left the hospital on a gurney at around 11pm. He had ordered a laugh out-loud potty mouth film for his three roommates all of whom were not expected to live to the end of the summer having extended their lives with treatments for ruthless cases of childhood leukemia and all by now *a true band of brothers*. Luca ordered pizza chips and bottles of soda which Phil his teacher brought to the room. Luca watched on too sick to participate. As they came to take Luca to Mt. Sinai there were raised fists all around. Death lurked just above the fist salutes.

It is now July 24th more than two months since the removal of his colon, and Luca has missed a semester of school, missed his training for tennis, left Mt. Sinai still on ongoing intravenous antibiotics, given too many steroids which have resulted in his face still being distorted and swollen and which, although necessary to keep him alive, are responsible we believe, for the further compromise of his basic well-being and were the probable cause of the fungus infection. Luca has noticeable scars on his body including on his upper thighs and on his back from simmering bedsores gotten during the lengthy stay in hospital beds. He has nerve damage and muscle damage in his legs that are directly linked to the severity and duration of the illness. We have been to a neurologist and an orthopedist who recommended he get an MRI and X Rays, which then provided evidence that these were illness related symptoms. He has to undergo intensive physical therapy just to be able to walk strongly and freely again and has to work on a bent over upper body and weakened arm strength after work on his legs has been completed. And most significantly, Luca cannot sleep through the night. He is fitful and wanders. A condition, we believe directly related to a lengthy difficult hospital stay including more than a week in an intensive care unit. (Note: Hospitals are on a twenty-four hour schedule and no patient ever gets to sleep through the night – medications need to be given, temperatures taken, etc.) Who knows the emotional toll of a child experiencing such an intense prolonged illness? We are in the process of identifying a suitable psychologist so that we can all receive therapy. Who can tally the length of recovery because he was so physically compromised? The second part of the surgery to rebuild his insides and get rid of the bag has to be delayed because *he was so very sick and because his insides need to be completely healed and he has to not only regain his weight but to be in fully fit*

physical condition according to his surgeon, Dr. H. This means that the course of treatment, the second part of the surgery and possibly a third part – the rebuilding of a colon may need to be a two-step process - thereby extending the illness and recovery into the following school and tennis year 2003-04.

Since March, when Luca became nearly bedridden with the recurrence of the ulcerative colitis, I have been unable to work at my lucrative consulting position three days a week or to help my daughter and son-in-law by taking care of my granddaughter two days a week while they worked. Except for walking the dog or food shopping, I have hardly left Luca's side. From the second admittance to NYU, Frank and I alternated nights sitting by Luca's bedside catnapping in chairs. Frank's work necessitated that he leave the hospital during most days. I sleep fitfully often finding myself weeping when suddenly recalling frightening medical episodes. I found it exceedingly difficult but therapeutic preparing this narrative. I believe my symptoms and Luca's as well are akin to those described as *post-traumatic shock syndrome*.

As of June 19th we were released from the care of the internist, Dr. Kornbluth., who claims his only real roll was to get us to the surgeon, Dr. Heimann., and the infectious disease doctor, Dr. G., "you don't need an infectious disease doctor any more Luca," Dr. G. said. "You were very, very sick and it is wonderful to see you now. We worked as a team," he said when we thanked him for saving Luca's life, and he continued, "it was with you and because of you Luca, and next time I see you it will be at Wimbledon." (Dr. G. is considered one of the best 100 physicians in NYC by the recent New York Magazine survey of spring 2003.) It was the surgeon, Dr. H., the infectious disease doctor, Dr. G. in tight consultation with Dr. Kornbluth and their entire team that without a doubt saved Luca's life.

It was Dr. Bangaroo., to his credit who referred us, as we now know, in the nick of time to this medical/surgical team at Mt. Sinai. He just should have done it three months sooner, particularly if he believed, as is evident now, that they (at Mt. Sinai) were better-equipped and knowledgeable and skilled to help Luca. The surgeon, Dr. Heimann, has said to us, "I wish I had done this three months or three and a half months earlier." Reverberating are the unending comments on the gravity of Luca's illness from the Mt. Sinai team of physicians. The comments raise questions and send chills through us. **How did it get this far?** We weren't, after all, home ignoring the illness or being negligent. Dr. Kornbluth. told Luca at his last visit on June 19th, "You will never know anybody who has been through a more difficult time or greater challenge than you have and you met it with strength and will. And now you are cured of ulcerative colitis and you do not have to worry about ever having ulcerative colitis again and I expect to see you at the American Open someday soon. You can have the second stage of the surgery as soon as Dr. Heimann. gives his okay"

More specifically, after a visit with Dr. H. on July 3, he said that *because Luca had been so sick his insides need a greater length of time to heal – particularly because the second surgery is so complex and he wants the recovery to be relatively uneventful.*

We have yet to figure the out-of-pocket medical expenses from the entire treatment at both hospitals. Much of those could have been avoided had we been transferred to Mt. Sinai sooner and had the surgery. I have not been able to work and have subsequently lost my substantial consulting position. Who knows what impact this will have on the rest of Luca's life, his education, his potential sizeable tennis career, and his basic health? I have no idea if and when I will be able to secure another such well-paying job. It is anticipated that medical costs that are uncovered will be considerable. Carfare, parking, dog sitting, taking care of a grandchild (two days a week) Luca's schooling, etc. all are factors to consider. It may be necessary to find a private school for Luca in which there is more personal attention and smaller class size due to loss of school time and a prolonged inability to focus and sustain regular high-level schoolwork.

But most troubling how did a physician, Dr. Bangaroo, and an entire medical team at NYU let his condition deteriorate so disastrously? Where were the checks and balances? How could he have been allowed him to suffer for so long without even the possibility to take painkillers, counter indicated with ulcerative colitis? We believe that it is Luca's will that kept him alive and his discipline as an athlete. But as parents we felt and were helpless at changing the course of his treatment at NYU, and continued to sign things and forms for tests and treatments we were told were either necessary or would be helpful to him. It never occurred to either of us that his colon needed to be immediately removed until the day we were leaving NYU when Dr. Bangaroo, told us it was a possibility along with the fact that we were being transferred immediately to Mt. Sinai. We had read that the only cure for ulcerative colitis was the removal of the colon but that seemed like a possibility very far in the future. Never were we aware that his colon was falling apart and the waste was seeping into his bloodstream at a disastrous nearly fatal rate until after the surgery. Mt Sinai pathology reports and other related medical records are clear evidence of the level of infection and state of the colon at time of the first emergency surgery.

When we were told by Dr. Bangaroo that we were being transferred on May 8th we were in the process of completing two days of nuclear medical testing, and on May 7th Luca was been given a colonoscopy and an endoscopy. The fevers were raging and to recount on the evening of May 7th Luca was given that last almost disastrous dose of the anti-fungal medication. The antibiotics were being increased and changed even as we were in the process of leaving. It seems as if there was a lot of activity almost as if the medical staff were trying to "cover their bases" as we were getting close to what we now know was a frightening, unthinkable, near brush with death for Luca.

When Dr. B. said that we were being transferred he said that this was, "a politically difficult position for him to take, but that he didn't like the surgical staff at NYU and that we were going to Mt. Sinai to be taken care of by a world-famous surgical and internal medical team that specialized in ulcerative colitis and colon surgery." Still we were completely unaware as Luca and I rode uptown in an ambulance at around 11 PM on May 8th 2003 that we were bound for emergency surgery that we were in a life and death struggle with a fulminating, perforated, septic colon.

The essential question deeply troubling to us is: how is it possible on the evening of May 8th and the very early morning of May 9th that a team of physicians led by a colon specialist, Dr. Kornbluth., and a surgeon Dr. Heimann. **could determine within moments of seeing Luca by looking at his face, touching his distended discolored unbelievably sensitive and pain riddled stomach, knowing he was feverish (102/103), that his white blood cell count was troubling - that after some necessary blood transfusions he had to have emergency surgery to remove the colon?**

“The colon has to come out!” Dr. Kornblth. announced upon seeing Luca. **“He has what we call a fulminating colon,”** Dr. Heimann. declared prior to surgery. They all knew he was in a life and death struggle and acted accordingly and worked hard to save him post-surgery. He also had an infected *Picc Line* inserted at NYU that was changed post surgery.

One can only be lead to believe that there was gross medical negligence, bad medical judgment and dangerous misguided treatment at NYU. Without exaggerating, at NYU Luca was being brought close to death. He could never have after all regained his vitality and extreme weight loss from 128 to 90 pounds because his diseased colon couldn't sufficiently absorb and process the food. Ulcerative colitis as we have come to know is an immune-deficient disorder, which left to fester could have led to any number of fatal diseases or infections. Infected *Picc Lines* inserted during stays at NYU could have further compromised Luca's well being.

Watching your own child becoming sicker and sicker while being treated so intensively in a hospital is an indescribable experience. Watching a child suffer who could not get relief from pain medicine and who kept getting thinner and sicker is life altering. Knowing that on July 24th we are still recovering from surgery and finally engaged in a course of rigorous physical therapy. Luca is receiving home schooling, still needing to gain back his weight to 128 pounds, gets tired easily, is still very weak, his appetite is not back, and he sleeps very fitfully. This from a 15-year-old who was the 8th ranked junior tennis player in the metro region for boys 16 as of December 2002 and thus obviously fit. He cannot walk great distances without getting fatigued and this again from a boy who ran three miles daily with very good times five days a week.

Luca handles *the bag* with grace but again because of his seriously deteriorated physical state at the time of the surgery to remove his colon he must wait as much as six months or more for the second part of the surgery and not the possible three months. The plaguing question remains, what will the impact be on Luca's entire life after having the experience of being in hospitals for more than three months, much of which was spent in almost unendurable suffering, having difficult daily tests while getting increasingly more physically compromised, when a surgery to remove part or the entire colon could have avoided much of the entire frightening hospital experience and what seemed like the medical thrashing about at NYU?

By way of personal observation, it seems as if there is serious lack of coordination among the different medical teams at NYU particularly the medical house teams and the infectious disease team. We believe that with investigation this would be born out.

Dr. Bangaroo although attentive to Luca and obviously concerned about him was in the end not up to directing the right course of treatment for him further, he did not trust the surgical team and perhaps also the infectious disease team at NYU and therefore was further hamstrung in his ability to take a more decisive step toward surgery almost before it was too late. He needed to confront this much sooner. Dr. Bangaroo seemed at times to be overly almost to the point of being thrown off course by Luca's occasional and understandable emotional upheavals. We believe it was Luca's questioning and trying to keep some control over what was being done to his body the very probing questions that helped to keep him alive. Many of the staff would tell Dr. Bangaroo that Luca was a difficult patient because of all of the excessive questioning and the need to control how particularly medicines could become tolerable or in which way he needed the daily or more vials of blood drawn. There were of course many of the house medical staff who were kind to Luca and worked with him honoring all of his very reasonable requests regarding many of these difficult and seemingly endless unpleasant procedures and tests. Many of the house staff are young and should be taught how difficult and frightening it is to be particularly a pediatric patient who feels he is dying and that giving if vociferous self-expression is necessary otherwise the children would just curl-up and give-in. Luca was even mocked which they heard about his discolored or "peacock like stomach" by a team of young doctors making the rounds. At one point, I suggested to a nurse that I be given the opportunity to talk about power and illness about healer and patient. We seemed to be continually providing a buffer between the medical staff, not all, and our very, very sick son.

Dr. Bangaroo was continually troubled by Luca's case, looking for answers, consulting others, ordering tests upon tests, and missing, we believe the, *forest through the trees*. Plain and simple all of the colon had to be taken out when Luca experienced the second bout of ulcerative colitis in February 2003, the symptoms pointing to a fulminating, septic colon were all in evidence: high ongoing fevers, unbelievable stomach cramping and pain, a distended stomach, high white count, etc.

Although we are certainly moving forward with schooling, therapies, and regaining an inner balance and looking toward having the second part of the surgery when the bag can be removed and the insides can be modified and reconstructed we cannot allow ourselves to be destroyed financially or emotionally without requesting an investigation of what exactly went wrong at NYU? Luca is fully aware and supportive of our looking into this and as we have learned it is a way of confronting the medical situation we found ourselves in, and of creating a check and balance so that some other child does not fall victim to the same dangerous confusion and ineptness.

We are aware that NYU and Mt. Sinai have some kind of partnership and connection, which should have facilitated a transfer of the records in a far more timely and life-saving fashion.

June 2013: Luca turns twenty-five on June 13, 2013 an auspicious date. If not expressed, he is always considering whether to have further surgery and another attempt to remove the colostomy bag and prepare his insides to work more normally. He has had weeks of Remicade in Dr. Kornbluth's office this the drug necessary to sustain the body changes and if difficult has had no bad side effects. Luca has undergone an internal exam given by Dr. Kornbluth under light anesthesia to see if he *J Pouch* is still in tact and not diseased or compromised. He has not scheduled the second necessary examination also under anesthesia by the surgeon Dr. Heimann to test how well the *J Pouch* would work if the reversal would take place. And although with only brief words of exchange it is clear that Luca is not mentally prepared to undergo more surgery at this time and perhaps believes as does his older brother Jeremy that radical medical advances will be available in the future to make it all more promising.

Luca has had a series of girlfriends two of whom have resided with us if not at the same time. The one a tall striking blond who at twenty-three managed a French fashion concession at Bloomingdales and who had an intimidating air as she prepared for work the kind of sales person who would keep me from even peeking my nose is such a venue. She was as unruly and mean spirited as her stilettos and Luca seemed to relish it and her. They would constantly be fighting and arguing not like the exacting and painful fights he had with Sarah way back in his early teenage years these were scary bordering on ruthless and damaging. I lay on my bed never knowing if I should intervene torn between my knowledge of Luca needing this relationship and perhaps its endemic savagery at this point in my life after all she tolerated his ostomy bag or to physically hurl our out. She was all cunning and all manipulation. She lured him into finding and fixing up a rental so they could have their own cozy home as a couple. Within days after they moved in Luca had paid for much of the apartment alterations and appliances acquired akin to newlyweds great attention paid to color and coordinates she invited Rebecca and her family and me for a wine toast. The very next day she called at 6am to tell me to come get Luca she was through it was over and that they were embroiled in a physically troubling altercation one which may have brought police. She said Luca's stomach was bleeding that she in retaliation had thrown a laptop computer at him and that he probably needed to go to the hospital or the doctor. She said Luca was pointing a knife at her. I told her to stay calm and we would come for Luca immediately. And in the one and only time I could and would count on Frank I asked him to go over and intervene while I got Dr. Kornbluth on the phone. Frank did go to the house immediately living just blocks away. I had the doctor on the phone who said he would wait to hear. Frank brought Luca home who looked broken and beaten down going immediately to his room slamming his door shut, it was possible to hear his muffled sobs even under the throb of some of his *Gangsta music*. I called Emily followed by an email saying the following: *don't you ever bring your bastard ass around this house or come near Luca I will have you pursued destroy your career and run you out of this town*. Slamming down the phone and without response to the email I do believe she felt unnerved and scared. Dr. Kornbluth remained *on call* throughout the day and Frank went home. It was his finest hour distress of that magnitude did not seem to throw him as it certainly did me if vitriol and threats to her were not idle on my part.

Friends come over. Luca is a devotee of Pot and all that it implies. Every Friday after Thanksgiving more than a dozen or so friends from elementary and high school all boys share a celebratory more or less traditional meal. He got an online GED meaning little except as documentation for entrance to the New York Film Academy though not closely examined or challenged. On his twenty-first birthday I got him a very expensive video camera which he selected and used to make a couple of short films each telling of a kind of artistry there although more recently the camera sits in its case. For some months he was filming and editing music videos and cable cooking shows with a friend but that seems to have drifted off to the past.

There are months and months of a kind of hibernation a deep kind of despair and depression and if we share 1,100 square foot apartment I rarely see him if I hear the bathroom and bedroom doors slam or close hard frequently. He baths or showers frequently. Since the end of that troubled relationship he has mostly been by himself. He rarely sees Frank who discontinued a divorce ritual of having a family meal at Peter Lugar's every Christmas Eve. Early on I learned the close connection of serious life threatening bouts of depression often leading to suicide in young ulcerative colitis and ostomy baring patients. This told to us by a psychiatrist Frank and I went to right after the last surgery when Frank seemed as if he was sinking under the weight of his failed dreams for Luca and I was knotted in a post-traumatic state of a mother vigil *until death do us part*.

Still I hate picking up the ringing phone worrying that the police have arrested Luca for Pot dealing or found him lying a mounds of his own poop in some gutter stoned and prostrate. Luca has taken a couple of trips by himself or with friends to Los Angeles neglecting to call Jeremy who lives there and to the Dominican Republic once with the evil witch sales manager and one with a elementary school friend. These are real triumphs one because he didn't got stopped by security, could manage his ostomy bag on the flights and have what he claims was a terrific time in the hotel with young friends and natives alike.

He sees Frank rarely although stays in touch wanting to stay at his apartment when he now travels to Argentina with his current girlfriend. Frank recently when they dined alone and his girlfriend was away following dinner asked Luca if he knew of *a topless bar they could go to*. The fundamental question the philosophical query about whether one could change character leans on the side of the negative. What father who abandoned us for at that time a Brazilian lover openly on display and with many subsequent women lives with which he merged and blended would actually ask a son not quite twenty-five trying to figure out how to live a more or less good life and who if to a fault had an indelible sense of integrity to take him in a spirit of camaraderie to a topless bar? Verdict one's essential character can't be changed.

The newest roommate really Luca's but by virtue of the dimensions and design of our apartment mine as well is a lovely twenty-two year old named Chloe. She is a girl who lived her entire life in our building one floor above until she left for college in Canada.

Fluent in French her French mother, a banker, died from a cancerous brain tumor when Chloe was thirteen and her brother seventeen. It is a week until Luca turns twenty-five they seem to enjoy each other although Luca resists calling it love or her a girlfriend. She I believes she and he are a couple. She seems very comfortable with his body as is and is always preparing or going out to fetch meals for him. She works in a very upscale French shoe store on Bleeker Street and rushes home to be with him at the end of the day. Luca spends most days sleeping seeming to be up for most of the night. This schedule will ultimately take a toll on her. *We cannot become a couple* Luca tells *her because couples break up but friend's stay together can be together for life*. Whatever the status of their relationship that sounds like a good way of regarding it.

There are days when I don't see him if I hear him going to and from the bathroom or kitchen and other times when he was burst in my room where I am reading or writing or watching television and kisses me summarily on the head saying cheerfully *what up mom how're you doing?* Friends come on a fairly regular basis only one or two times have I found them unsavory and told Luca they are not to return most often he finds I was right. But for *the next sixteen minutes* life seems to be working. I grow older moments from becoming seventy-three with more and more of me coming into view and mind. You were too much of a bureaucrat some said my ninety-five year old friend Maxine shares with me ouch sting no wonder I was so often caste aside by the liberal education cognoscenti. My older son Jeremy warns me against metaphoric thinking about critical family issues ouch his anger kicks up from the time of his father and my divorce almost thirty five years ago as well as palpable disdain for me poet and writer often shared dedicated or written for or to him.

Today each day is mine to craft and I never have on so many multiple levers felt to happy and content if never far is the anticipation of the earth to break apart for a walk on an emotional and historic biblical fault, which inevitably with shudder with a rare and dangerous intensity. Aware and alert I go forward not knowing if I will die before the great and necessary family upheavals or I will be here to stand as witness my preference is the former but to quote my mother now dead more than two years, *this is hard this is hard dying is so hard!*

THAT is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
- Those dying generations - at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come

To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Sailing to Byzantium, William Butler Yeats



In the end I want to remember myself as my eyes stare out still blankly lifeless as a mother as The Pieta loving that much so mournful within. Mine was a life that never successfully shed the sins of the past before wrecking hell and upheaval within my life and those of my children's. I go love an adult kind of love be it for male or female all wrong to scared to figure it out or live it more than as fantasy or longing. And my older children have found mates they couldn't or shouldn't have loved. So the turntable goes round and round and more music is composed or unearthed and if we harm the sun we hope it is not unredeemable. I was less then Joan of Arc at work but more than just a bureaucrat. And so did I or not miss *the next sixteen seconds*? I do not and will never know.

Naomi Barber
June 2013

THE END