Sketch Box Stories

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The Sketch Box Stories
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Stories

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Dream Riddle

Georgina walked Solange to the door.

"Thanks for coming tonight." Georgina smiled.

"Paulo and I wouldn't have missed this. The house looks wonderful. You and Klaus have done such wonderful things with it. Not everyone has time." Solange was thinking about her two children and of the baby sitter who needed to be taken home.

"We have to get up early . . . the children you know . . . we've already stayed too late. I'm envious all of a sudden, seeing your house and how much time you spent on it I can honestly say that . . . would you like two children?" Georgina and Solange laughed.

"All these compliments have quite turned our head. Call me soon and we'll spend some time in that thing I call the 'gazebo' having coffee, tea, wine and cakes, whatever you like. We'll be the only animals in my jungle."

"But really Georgina, you're so lucky to have all this time to spend on your projects. Well, we have to get home to our children. Here comes Paulo with the car."

With Solange and Paulo leaving only a handful of good friends were left, friends that Georgina and Klaus had made since they had been in France, except for Pierre and Luberta whom they had known off and on for years. The compliments continued. Some commented on their very modern art collection. The collection had no historic value but was chosen after much study and with an eye to personal taste. Others complimented them on their sumptuously covered imported English chintz couches and chairs, and still other guests on their tastefully eclectic polished antiques. And all commented on the exotic plants and flowers everywhere in and around the house.

"Georgina, so much work and now your creation is finally complete!" said Gregory the portly Polish writer who was spending a year in their more private guest room, a huge studio above the garage.

"Gregory is obviously right your house is the expression of your creative urge!" said their friend Andrea a psychiatrist, teacher and painter. "You shouldn't have kept us all at such arms length while you worked on it. We would have loved sitting drinking wine on your step ladders while you both got down on your hands and knees with the workmen doing the things you did!" Everyone laughed.

"It was very appropriate to throw a dinner party for the unveiling. You're such a wonderful cook.
And to serve a Greek meal in France is just the epitome of your outrageous taste.” Pierre facetiously
grimaced. He was very French and a very good French chef which was his preoccupation when he wasn’t
being an authority on the journals of the Goncourt brothers.

“Having spent so much of our time traveling, we can’t help our eclectic tastes, Pierre, and not
everyone has your refined palette for French sauces!” Klaus cheerfully smiled at his old friend Pierre, not
in the least bothered by his remark. He patted him on the back and asked, “Would you have preferred a
simpler Germanic meal of meat and potatoes from my homeland? Or perhaps an Indian meal from
Georgina’s again? We’ll get you with something just as different next time!”

Georgina told the maid who had come in to help with the party to go home, that what was left to
do could be done the next day. The party continued with these few friends forming an intimate circle
around some couches and chairs. There was a great deal of wine, teasing, poking fun and laughter.

“Nefertiti and The World Bank . . . You lucky dog Klaus, however did the two of you meet?”
Serge, Andrea’s date for the evening asked. “Or was it just always Georgina and Klaus, Klaus and
Georgina?” Everyone laughed.

“Well, no! I love telling this.” Klaus smiled at Georgina. “Everyone here already knows this story.
I was sent from South Africa to Pakistan. A friend of mine, Harry, was already there. He had a girl
friend, Rose. Rose lived in a row of compartments, I would call them that rather than houses, where only
Anglo-Indians lived. In other words one parent was Indian and the other was English.

“Georgie lived next door behind an iron gate. One day we met outside the gate. Georgie’s family
had lost a great deal of their land during the partition with India. They were not particularly happy
living in these series of domino like rooms that opened into a courtyard enclosed by a wall and the gate.
I’ll never forget how she seemed to me, beautiful, petite, exotic, young. She was wearing a short short
pink top with her midriff and belly showing, her sari was wrapped low.” Karl snapped his hand back and
forth indicating ‘hot.’

“That was it! I fell in love. She wasn’t happy there, things were changing so much, and I couldn’t
wait to kiss her long elegant neck with those three rings around it. They are almost like the imprints of
three necklaces aren’t they?” Klaus pointed to Georgina’s slender neck and the three lines embedded in
the skin at the center an inch apart that seemed to separate parts of her throat. “We talked. It wasn’t long
after that . . .”

“I think for me,” Georgina interrupted walking over to Klaus and putting her hand on Klaus’s
arm. “Klaus came at the right time. It was perfect. He was perfect. I don’t want him to make it sound
like he was my form of escape. My family didn’t object. His family didn’t object much. Many of our friends were leaving the country or had left. Many of them are still leaving.

“That was the beginning for us. Klaus and I went back to his Germany for a while and then World Bank kept sending him on assignment to other places. Now we’re here in Paris or outside of it I should say and here to stay. . . . shoo what a long story!” Georgina giggled feeling the Merlot, “And all this talk about us! You know this evening has been almost entirely about us, and frankly I’m tired of it!” She thrust out her lower lip in a fake pout. “Let’s talk about something else? Andrea how’s your painting coming, do you like where I put the landscape . . . .”

“But was it always Georgina?” Serge persisted. “Georgina and Klaus?”

“Oh no it was Neelum and Klaus.” Klaus said. “I gave her the name Georgina when she wanted something European to call herself.”

“Part of it was that I didn’t want my name mangled.” Georgina said trying to force a smile.

“The truth is I gave that name to Georgina. Georgina . . . Regina. You know, Her Majesty Elizabeth Regina. It was a play on her colonial upbringing.” Klaus smiled pleasantly at Serge yet watched Georgina out of the corner of his eye and knowing that she was uncomfortable he tried to make the explanation as brief as possible.

“Let’s stop talking about this. I just want to forget it all. I want to forget the decay and poverty, the graft, the bribes and corruption. The obsessive religious feelings and the very rich who do nothing but enjoy their class status.” Georgina looked exasperated and suddenly exhausted. “Now let’s all comment on Andrea’s landscape painting, shall we?”

“What are you going to do now Georgina?” Luberta asked trying to change the subject completely. “What’s your new project going to be?”

“Well, I don’t really know.” Georgina started hesitantly. “Probably it will be something that Klaus and I will come up with together. I was thinking of maybe doing some thing with women in underdeveloped countries, especially Africa. I wasn’t thinking of a job really but something I could devote some energy and time too. Klaus and I haven’t discussed any of this yet so I’d like to wait on that too.” Georgina smiled apologetically at Klaus who had a puzzled look on his face.

“It just felt so good after we got here and we knew that it was going to be permanent. It feels wonderful to not be living out of rented houses and always feeling like it was out of a box. Finally we have managed to put all our things in one place.” Georgina kept looking at Klaus to stop her or back her up but he just nodded his head in agreement.

“So now how about Andrea’s landscape?”
After the last guest was gone Georgina went to her bedroom to change while Klaus locked up. She told herself it had been a very successful evening, while she sat looking at her reflection in the full length mirror of her antique bureau. The bureau had a low knee high table with drawers on either side for cosmetics and jewelry. Georgina kept her wedding jewelry which came as a personal dowry in these drawers. As she looked at her flushed reflection she thought that at 37 she looked eighteen. She looked down at her clothes and loved the simplicity of the hand silk screened pattern, three leaves on a stem repeated and reversed forming a triangle white on black and black on white. She felt the richness of the medium weight matte silk with her hands. All evening she had emanated sophistication and her own unique simple style and elegance. She couldn't have looked better or done a better job of the party for Klaus and their friends. Georgina got up a little unsteadily and undressed and hung the clothes from a hanger on the outside of her closet for the maid to pick up and take to the cleaners the next day, and sat down at her bureau again loosening the bun at the nape of her neck. The clothes reflected in the mirror. The top shorter in the middle, made like an upside down U and the straight wide draw string pants. From the reflection her eyes moved to the matching earrings on her ears, free form 6 by 4 inch triangular shapes made up of layers of guinea fowl feathers wrapped in silver wire ending in a silver ball suspended on hooks. Her eyes moved between the earrings and the clothes and it occurred to Georgina that this whole attire was not only her wardrobe but a metaphor for something or someone else. As she intently looked at the clothes and earrings she felt these items belonged to a ceremonial bird. She imagined the clothes as part of the bird's camouflage, the earrings a hint of the bird's hiding place in the black twigs, and white leaves. Wearing them she felt herself transform into some kind of a bird hiding in a black tree at night with the moonlight shining and making the leaves shine white and black.

At this point in Georgina's reverie Klaus walked in and sat on the couch with the miniature roses in their large bedroom sitting room and looked around him slightly drunk, satisfied and a little smug.

"Everything about us now is settled, so well done, finished. Even the architects and designers we pick, you know Georgina, are not necessarily picked because we are trying to establish some upper class status but because they are the most interesting." Klaus put his forefinger like a hook in the knot of his tie loosening it.

"Really Klaus! I can't believe what you're saying!" Georgina gasped, "but you know all of the wine and compliments have gone to my head also and I've been thinking the same kinds of things." Georgina put her fingers to her mouth and crushed a burp but not the giggles.
“We owe all of this to you, so much to you...” Klaus thinking about getting up and kissing Georgina, feeling too tired, decided against it and threw out his legs, pushing himself back into the couch, loosening his tie further.

“And to you, it’s our combined interests Klaus.”

That night she dreamt about a tree called *Khatta* that bears fruit which looks like a cross between an orange and grapefruit, a huge thick skinned pock marked inedible fruit. In the dream she’s a child again, crawling and playing with sticks; she crawls under bushes but she has difficulty because although she seems to be dressed and behaving like a child her size is that of an adult. Hunched, weaving in and out of bushes she picks up bones and puts them into a burlap bag like the bone people of her childhood, who used to wander around picking up after dogs and people, finished with bones. She used to think that they boiled the bones down and then when they were soft crushed them for medicine. In her dream it occurs to her that they picked up the bones after the dogs got done with them to boil them down for soup to eat.

There among the tall *Khatta* trees she jumps, flaps her imaginary wings around the compound playing with and becoming one of the birds. When she begins to transform into something else she wakes up to see the moonlight coming in through the wooden shutters on the windows and a long shadow falling on the floor. She looks up to see a person standing by her closet door. Not alarmed she wakes up enough to see that it is her clothes from the night before. Feeling something poking her, she feels her ears in the dark and realizes she has forgotten to take off her earrings. It is the poking that woke her. She felt them off and put them on the night stand by the bed. She then turned to look at Klaus who was sleeping soundly next to her. “Strange dream” she thought and fell asleep again.

The next day Georgina woke up late in the morning after Klaus had already gone to work. The maid brought her breakfast and started to take her previous night’s clothes down from the closet. “No!” Georgina said sharply. “I want to wear it again.”

The maid shook her head no and didn’t understand, “You never wear your party clothes more than once!”

“Oh I know, but this time I want these to stay.” Georgina mumbled from the bed. “Sorry I’m being so difficult this morning. Too much partying last night... I can’t eat all this, not even the toast. Maybe just the cafe au lait.”
Georgina felt the silky fabric of her sheets with the palm of her hands and like a cat luxuriously stretched. When the maid left the room Georgina gave up her pretense of nibbling and sipping. She put the tray to one side got up and walked to her bureau and started brushing her long thick, thigh length wavy hair a hundred strokes. When she was young her great aunts would use a hot curved 8" curling iron, like a big clip with a clamp on top to accentuate their waves which looked like rows of fingers when they were done. Georgina got this same effect almost without trying.

As she sat brushing, two similar stories came back to her. Both were about snakes that came back to avenge their mates murder. One story was about an Englishman who wanted desperately to get rid of two Cobras that wandered around his house. He made a plan. He was warned however that if he didn’t kill both the other would seek revenge. He didn’t believe that such a thing was possible. Against advice he put some poison milk out in the bathroom. One Cobra drank it and died. Soon after that his wife was found dead in the shower of a Cobra bite. The other story was about a woman who wanted the most beautiful, longest, thickest hair in the land and heard it said that this could be accomplished with Cobra oil. She went against every one’s wishes and got the oil and then one night she woke up gasping to find the Cobra’s mate wrapped around her hair and neck. Georgina thought these stories were coming back to her because they fitted so well at this point in Klaus and her marriage and how they were feeling about themselves and each other.

She finished brushing her hair and rolled it up into a bun at the nape of her neck. Georgina considered what she would do for the day and she thought she would go shopping and buy two more of the black silk screened pant suits in different colors. She had never done anything like this before. Imitated herself. She called the boutique and had them save whatever was left for her to try on.

That evening she showed Klaus the twin pant suits in dusty rose and pale pastel green. “You’ll never wear them” he said. “But I don’t see why you shouldn’t have them if you want them. It’s up to you.”

“I had the strangest dream last night. It was all in bits and pieces but as I was beginning to grow feathers around a fire, I woke up to find I was being poked by my guinea fowl earrings.”

Klaus smiled. “You’ll always be my free spirited bird. What do you think it was about? The dream?”

“I don’t know what the dream was about. I was running around Khatta trees. They’re green fruit—a cross between a grapefruit and an orange.”

“Well, let’s see, didn’t your father grow Khatta trees before you moved into the house we met in?”

“Oh yes, you’re right. Before the money started to dry up because most of it was in India. We lived in a very beautiful house where he fancied himself a landscape artist and had grown a hedge of 16
these trees. They grew so fast and furiously. Like Jack in the Beanstalk they seemed to sprout over night and bear that strange green fruit. Neither an orange nor a grapefruit, totally inedible!” Georgina sat uncomfortably straight and tense.

Klaus watched her body language and thought she really has had a very happy and pleasant childhood. Why does she choose to forget so much of it? But he didn’t want to force her to think about things she didn’t want to think about. For many years their contact with other family consisted of phone calls every Sunday and occasional visits. Usually because of Klaus’s hectic schedule the visits were from their family. Because they had been without any immediate or extended family nearby they relied on each other for everything. They were and had always been passionate lovers and intimate friends for as long as they had known each other.

“Didn’t you once try to interpret dreams?” he said trying to make her more comfortable by changing the subject.

“Klaus you remember so much! Honestly how do you do it! I read a book on it once. Andrea gave it to me because it was the only thing that I thought I could relate to in psychiatry. But I can’t say that I was particularly interested. And this is all so different. It has something to do with the clothes I bought.”

“Oh well how was your day?” Exasperated Georgina dropped the whole subject. It seemed senseless to her.

That night Georgina dreamt the dream again. She was an adult doing little girl things, but now there were two guinea fowls under the Khatta trees. There were lots of chickens, Rhode Island reds and Plymouth Rocks who whispered their type and name to her. Among all this purebred flock was an ordinary black Indian rooster with iridescent feather tips, who didn’t talk to Georgina or want to have anything to do with her. Georgina played in her elegant black pant suit among the fowls. She had on her guinea fowl earrings and a black feathery white polka dotted guinea fowl mask had grown, covering the upper half of her face. She ran around on her hands and feet with the guinea fowl, and the cook chased the three of them with a cleaver. He kept muttering that the guinea fowl would not lay eggs and they had to be eaten because they were a waste, and all they did was eat. Then Georgina would change her dance and find herself rolling around with the black rooster whom the cook would then start chasing because he was the odd one in the bunch and needed to be eaten because of it. In between crawling with the guinea fowl and rolling with the black rooster Georgina ran in and out of the Khatta trees flapping her
pretend wings. From this rolling, flapping and crawling Georgina finally woke up, shaking her head in dismay.

The next day, before they went out to dinner, Klaus and Georgina sat quietly having martinis. Georgina was sitting cross legged on the sofa her high heeled shoes flung off on the Persian carpet. She sat sipping her drink, flipping through the pages of *Vanity Fair*. Klaus sat lounging, tie loose, coat thrown over another chair and shoes tossed off, legs spread out before him.

"Are you going out in that?"

"No, wore it all day." She said about her light green pastel wrinkled silk pant suit, the twin of the black one.

"I suppose I’ll have to change too."

"We have time." Georgina threw the magazine aside. "Were you very busy today?"

"My day went fine, even though you kept me up half the night tossing and flailing your arms. But I didn't do too badly considering the lack of sleep."

"Sorry, it was that dream again in which I become a child in an adult body. I have to fit in and among trees and bushes playing with guinea fowl and the Rhode Island reds and Plymouth Rocks." Georgina smiled.

"It must bother you somewhat because you don't smile in your sleep as you are now in your sleep. Instead you seem quite upset."

"Well, I'm not sure if it is or is not a nightmare. Right before someone gets roasted over an open fire, the black rooster, the guinea fowl, or me, I wake up. The fire is always made beautifully with evenly stacked wood and is always visible at a distance, but I'm not really conscious of it. I'm also not conscious of the people who pick bones, men mostly, but they are there in the wide open distance spaces. Basically I just run around dressed in my party clothes with the chicken and fowls and the cook chases us."

"I still think, Georgina, it means something?" Klaus asked amused but interested.

"Oh, silly me, a long lost desire to become a Rhode Island red hen!" Georgina shot back. "Stop teasing me Klaus!"

"I tell you, Georgie, you don't look happy in your sleep! So at some point you must have been around chickens since you know so much about them?"

"My family raised them. I don't think it was really necessary, just an exotic endeavor. The Rhode Island reds and Plymouth Rocks my parents incubated from eggs from America. Once we had a black Indian cock that accidentally came with some eggs that were incubated. Because he was very obvious and
different he became our very favorite pet. I don't think my sister and I really noticed what our parents did with the chickens until the cook tried to do away with our black rooster friend. After that we made a pact to become vegetarian."

"Georgie you know I'm getting to know you all over again as a sophisticated Indian poultry farmer. I find this fascinating. A new you emerges. I like it, it's like being married to a different woman. I'll have to ask my wife if I can have an affair with this new woman in my life."

"Klaus, seriously. You know I think that black party pant suit is another person. The night after the party I saw it reflected in the moonlight shadow and it looked like a person standing at the closet."

"Friend or fowl?" Klaus asked. Georgina rolled her eyes smiling. She got up and dropped herself across Klaus' legs, bouncing on his lap.

"Ow," he winced and grabbed her, burying his head in her neck, sighing.

For several nights Georgina dreamed only snippets of her previous dreams. The dream was in huge enlarged snap shots, stills and frames. She reported to Klaus that the repetitive dreams were gradually dissipating. Even now, however, in the frames the guinea fowl only ate and never produced, so they could be reproduced and the black rooster stayed the odd man out. The cook was never far with his cleaver, and the bone pickers and the fire remained. Georgina herself was no longer in the images. They seemed very pristine, repetitive, and distilled. Now that she was no longer in them she found them actually interesting and at times beautiful.

Klaus was relieved that her discomfort was abating and he was overjoyed at not being attacked by Georgina's arms and legs. Her previous movement, he told her, reminded him of a fish just reeled in or a large bird trapped in a very small cage. He thought that perhaps Georgina might talk things over with their friend, Andrea, not as a prospective patient but just a friend seeking free medical advice, in this case the interpretation of the friend's dreams. They both laughed at this "free advice" being the bane of every medical professional. But Georgina felt that she really didn't want to bother Andrea about it and since it looked like the dream episodes were under control and almost over, there was no interpretation necessary.

A week later Klaus was away in Switzerland for an African development conference. He had asked her to go with him but since it was only for three days she had declined, knowing he wouldn't have much time for her. She wanted to finish up the odds and ends still remaining on the house. During these three days Georgina took care of every detail from making sure there were no paint flecks on the window glass,
to re-arranging carpets and putting them where she felt they should go, and finally to pruning in her
garden, this last being an endless job. On the last day of the mammoth work-a-thon she came in
exhausted and decided to take a long hot bath and to do something about her damaged nails. She spent
the evening in pampering and luxuriated at having time to spoil herself. While she brushed her hair at
her bureau she sat thinking that Klaus would be back by ten the next day. Then she started thinking
about what her next major project should be. With these happy thoughts and expectations she went to
bed.

Deep into sleep the scenes appeared. At first she sat watching them. The guinea fowls strutting
under the Khatta tree making happy clucking noises in their throats, stopping every now and then to pick
up the seeds laid out for them on the ground. The hens and roosters walked around lazily. She could see
clearly behind the row of the four Khatta trees to the cook’s small quarters and next to it a storage room,
kept locked. On one side of the Khatta trees was an open space that dropped off into the field of the
compound. In the field were the bone pickers and the fire made of wood neatly stacked in a square with
more wood burning in the center. It was mid morning and the morning light filtered through the leaves
and fell in patches everywhere.

For the first time Georgina recognized it as one of her family homes. With that recognition she
was taken into the scenes. She wandered around touching everything for the first time, loving every
touch, but soon the happy scene was interrupted by the appearance of the cook. Georgina also
recognized him as one of their actual cooks. He even acknowledged her as “missy Neelum,” then he
hunched, almost squatting, slowly crept up behind the guinea fowls. He pounced on one of the fowls and
before the shocked bird could flap its wings he had it pinned under his arm and was tying its feet
together. He left the fowl flapping on the ground a way off. Next he went after the mate and managed to
capture it too. By now all the fowl were in disarray and asking Neelum for advice. Georgina ran after the
cook, pulled on his arm, trying to stop him, but he pushed her away. “All they do is eat and never
produce, missy Neelum.” Next he went after the black rooster. Georgina ran after him but he wouldn’t
listen and kept saying quietly, “He doesn’t belong with these other hens and roosters. If you try to stop
me from doing my job you’ll be plucked and stewed too.”

All of a sudden the tempo of the dream changed. Everywhere there was squawking, flying wings,
flapping. The black rooster was caught. A tree stump appeared in the middle of all the flying wings and
feathers. All the captured fowl were be-headed on the stump. Their heads fell on one side while their
bodies twitched and flapped around the stump on the other. But this bloodshed was not enough for the
cook. He grabbed the bodies and chopped off the tied legs and claws. There was blood everywhere. Georgina was splattered with it and soon, as he went on hacking, she was covered in blood. She ran around looking for someone or some way to stop the massacre or to hide from it. She found herself in front of the storage room and violently jiggled the big rusted lock. Although the lock would not open, the door did. Georgina, breathless, sat huddled in the corner among all kinds of boards and cement blocks and old wicker baskets. She felt she should do something but could not move. At first she wrapped her arms around her head so she couldn’t hear the squawking or see the blood. Next she looked around for a board to hit the cook with. As she was looking around for the right board she found, lying in between two cement blocks an old flat wicker bread basket full of more than a dozen small round guinea fowl eggs. The fowl had been brooding. She screamed so loudly she woke herself up.

Klaus came home at 10:00 am but nobody was home to greet him. It wasn’t the maid’s regular day and he thought Georgina must have gone somewhere. After going through the mail and helping himself to a late breakfast he made his way upstairs to drop off his suitcase. He thought he might spend the day reading, lounging, or working on a report of the conference for his colleagues.

He found Georgina, the bed unmade, her hair down and flying. She was pacing back and forth in her pale pink pajamas. Her eyes were blood shot. It looked like she had been crying.

“I’m never going to have anything to do with them. They’re never coming to see us again, you hear me Klaus!”

Klaus dropped his suitcase his mouth dropped open in amazement.

“No more Sunday telephone calls. No more visits by my family to our house.” She kept talking and pacing.

“Georgina, calm down, and tell me what happened.”

“Last night I found the eggs. They were in the store room. It was just like the dream. I remember now that everything in the dream is real and true. It happened just like that.”

“Let me get you a shot of whiskey, and then you sit down and tell me from the beginning what happened.”

Klaus made her sit down brought the whiskey and made her take a swallow. He sat down next to her and stroked her back gently while he sorted out the dream from the reality. From what he could tell, Georgina’s family had had a pair of guinea fowl that her parents wanted to breed but they never laid any eggs so her parents ordered them killed. The two girls couldn’t stop their parents and had been extremely upset by that and the black rooster’s death. Days after the guinea fowl died Georgina had found their
eggs in a torn flat bread basket in the storage room. She was in awe of the potential for life in her hands and devastated at what could possibly have been many beautiful new friends destroyed. The eggs were ruined and the guinea fowl were dead. Georgina told this story in spurts, at time with lucidity and quickly at other times finding it difficult to find the words.

“Oh, Klaus, I’m so glad you’re here.” She finally calmed down and took a deep breath. “But I mean what I said when you walked in. I never want to call my parents again or have anything to do with them.”

“But Georgie you can’t cut off all ties. Be sensible. This happened such a long time ago and you were a child. They did what they did innocently.” Klaus looked concerned and was worried for Georgina’s sake.

“No. This is the end. I’m never going back there, which we never do anyway, and we’ve only done once in 15 years. I’m cutting off ties with the family too.”

“You’ll see how silly this all is once you put it in perspective.” Klaus really loved his Indian family and couldn’t imagine not being involved with them.

As the weeks progressed Georgina became her old self. She never had that dream or any other memorable one. She slowly started avoiding making calls or thinking about when her parents and other family should come to visit. The change was subtle, slow but complete. Only Klaus sadly sensed the change and knew that she had made a complete transfer to this new life which had begun years before. There was nothing left of Neelum, only Georgina reigned supreme.
Epiphany, the Morning of July 28, 1993

Often Miriam takes a shower in a bathtub that has a layer of soap built up on it. In the refrigerator is a pot of garbanzo beans needing to have a sauce made for them a week ago already, which she still hasn’t done. The bed is usually made by just straightening out the sheet and throwing the bed cover over it. She uses the bed cover as a blanket all year ‘round. And there Miriam is in the mornings, feeling guilty about having all these things to do, watching CNN and drinking coffee, thinking about her day. Oh yes, there is also the unmentionable: some dishes in the sink from the night before. The guilt and stress of this situation are difficult for her to bear sometimes, but they are not enough to make her change her lifestyle. Not enough to emulate the women who have raised her. She admires them so much from a distance. With their immaculate ways, they seem to her to know just how to get things done. They had all told her that organization opened the door to getting things accomplished in life. They never really have time to waste like she does. Miriam sees them as models, efficiently going about their business in their family homes. Living these clean immaculate lives and getting other things done. And when she measures herself against them, she knows that something is wrong with her; that she is making herself ill not having control of her surroundings, for letting them rule her instead of ruling them.

So, over coffee and CNN she thinks, thinks and wonders and asks herself if there was an obvious moment when it had all gone wrong.

Miriam’s father had been away in New York attending Columbia University. She, her mother and her brothers were living in Pakistan, in Sargodha, with her great aunt whom everybody called Dadi Mary. Miriam attended a convent school. Her aunt Rehanna had come to spend her holidays with them.

In the courtyard at the back of the house there was a wall that separated the house from the garden Miriam was sitting cross-legged with her back to this wall. A pair of knitting needles lay in her lap. She was watching the hummingbird nest in the small pomegranate tree near her. Bees were humming at the lip of the hammam that stood under the pomegranate tree. Miriam’s doll with pom-poms pinned onto her dress was sitting beside her and an open book was lying face-down on the ground nearby.

Her mother and aunt were sitting on the two separate jute beds not far away with their backs
partially to Miriam, but sitting in such a manner that they could easily turn around to keep all the children in view. They had open magazines and knitting scattered around them and were using the two jute beds as desks. Ma Jeeva, the cook, was talking to Dadi Mary in the kitchen area. The window was open allowing everyone to hear them discussing the evening meal and chopping fresh vegetables that were going to be turned into pickles. Miriam’s brothers were running around in their usual unruly manner. Her mother’s hands were busy knitting. She was making sweaters for all of them. This particular one was for one of the younger children. She was using leftover yarn, knitting it in the striped pattern that Miriam called Joseph’s ladder. They all had such sweaters, but Miriam’s mother considered them to be for younger children.

“Now Rehanna, you should think of yourself. It’s all very well to take care of your brothers and sisters and teach on top of that, but you really should consider getting married.” Her mother didn’t watch her own rapidly moving hands. The needles made little clicking sounds.

“But Bhaji, I have a very fulfilling life, and can’t really leave my younger brothers and sisters. Who would look after them? They’re all in school and getting their degrees. I’m not worried about getting married. Why should you be?” She turned the pages of the pattern magazine slowly, wetting her finger on her lip to separate the pages.

“But he’s a nice man and you should think about it.”

“He may be a nice man, but he’s a Muslim and my brothers would never allow such a marriage.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter if your other brothers won’t allow it. Now, if Mumtaz were here instead of in New York, he would certainly want you to marry this man. We are educated, independent women and you know there is always a way to get around this kind of problem after you’re married. I’m sure as a husband he would have no objections to letting you believe whatever you wanted to. But, yes, Mumtaz’s approval is important. He is after all the oldest of your brothers.”

“We say our prayers morning, noon and night, go to church twice on Sundays. You know how it is. How do I know he won’t make me his second wife after we’re married when his parents decide they want him to have a Muslim family? No, no. I don’t think it will work out.” Rehanna was visibly agitated. The question of marriage was uncomfortable for her.

Miriam was eight, but the fact that Rehanna was not married at twenty-eight made her a spinster, and so this conversation about whether Rehanna should get married, and to whom, piqued her curiosity. Miriam eavesdropped intently. She knew the man must be someone they all knew because her mother was very careful not to mention his name. She wondered why they didn’t just arrange a marriage for Rehanna. Miriam was all for it, she had even asked Dadi Mary to arrange a marriage for her. She liked
the idea of being engaged to a boy and had requested that he be a Noor, the family Dadi Mary had married into. Miriam believed part of the success of a family depended on whether they could make advantageous marriages, but her family seemed to be unable to do that. Her aunt and mother admired European ways and she was afraid to interrupt them with her highly orthodox opinions.

Miriam had more pressing problems. Before the end of the weekend she had to have a knitting project finished for school. The project was going to be used for a school charity bazaar. She had known about the project for a long time, but somehow never had the patience to start it. The remaining months turned into weeks and her mother and aunt still had not been able to convince her to get going. They thought a sweater, booties and a cap for a newborn would be the easiest and quickest things to make. Miriam had, in fact, made some unsuccessful, tangled attempts. Finally her mother had told her that they would make pom-poms to put on top of the cap and showed Miriam how to wind them and then cut the yarn. She found the pom-pom the most interesting part and made thirty-one pom-poms for her doll and pinned them all over her doll's clothes.

"I can't do this," Miriam said out loud, feeling anxious.

"Yes you can," Mother and Aunt said in unison. "It's easy. You already know how to do a knit stitch."

"But somebody has to show me how many stitches I need on my needle."

"Look at him. Look what he's trying to do. Don't put that in your mouth!" Mother snatched up Miriam's baby brother and gave him a hug.

"Auntie Rehanna will you tell me how many stitches to put on the needle?"

"Well how many should she put on, Bhaji?" her aunt asked her mother, "for what age should she make it?"

"Depends on how much time she has."

"The bazaar is tomorrow and if I don't have it done, I'll get a bad grade. I think it's so stupid that girls have to knit things. I don't want too. I don't want to do it!" In anger and frustration, Miriam had started to raise her voice. The thought of girls having to knit was absolutely abhorrent to her. Her orthodox opinions concerned only arranged marriages.

Ma Jeeva came out. She was having trouble with the pickles.

Miriam complained to her that she had to have her project done by Monday and it was Sunday evening and nobody was helping her.

"You help her, Ma Jeeva!" "Help her with her knitting, she's impossible!" said Mother and Aunt, tired of Miriam's fussing.
“I would, but you two are so much better at knitting than I could ever be. Besides, I don’t have time, I have to finish the pickles tonight.”

“Just do part of the cutting and storing for the pickles. It’s a big project and we can take our time doing it. As for her knitting,” declared her mother, “Miriam should have started a long time ago. The children still need to have their baths before they go to bed. We still have to eat supper. Right now, Rehanna and I are in the middle of finishing the children’s sweaters. And she wants us to stop everything and help her when nobody has the time. She’s the oldest. She should understand and learn to put others first like the rest of the family does and not just think of herself.”

There was a brief silence.

“Supper will be ready in an hour,” Ma Jeeva said reassuringly. “I’m going to stop pickling for tonight and finish making supper.”

One of Miriam’s brothers yanked on the little one and he let out a yell.

Miriam was suddenly terrified. The nuns might take a ruler and hit her on the head where her hair was parted if she didn’t get her knitting assignment finished. Miriam had seen them do it to her brother when for a short time they had been together in the same classroom. It hurt her so much to see it happen that she had cried and told the nun that she was going to tell her family. Her brother often complained of headaches and Miriam was sure they were the result of being hit with a ruler.

Then again it would be embarrassing to be the only girl who had not done her project, let alone receive a bad grade. Did the other girls have to get their mothers to work on their projects? She was convinced they did. Some of them had started bringing in their work, and it didn’t really look like they had done it by themselves.

Her mother and her aunt did everything so well. Her aunt sewed, knit, took care of her house, her brothers and sisters, taught school and was very independent at the same time. Miriam briefly supposed that she would have to learn all these things if she wished to have the kind of life she imagined she wanted and which the two women had led. What kind of boy would like it if you didn’t take care of him and his children? This was why, following her own logic, she had asked for the arranged engagement, an understanding between neighbors. It would be easier to grow up together, then he would see her shortcomings from the very beginning and be able to understand them.

Both her mother and her aunt did things that she was really not interested in. Miriam found their womanliness interesting, the fact that they could be married and give birth. She was also impressed by the fact that they managed things, but she was not concerned with the actual details of the work they had
to do. But then, she wasn’t seriously invited to be involved in their doings. She was usually told her responsibility was to keep up with her school work.

“Miriam has to do girlie stuff. She has to knit some stupid thing,” taunted one of her brothers peeping from behind the partition between the kitchen and courtyard, screwing up his face. “And I want supper. I come first and you come last.”

“Shut up! At least I don’t make the nuns so angry they hit me on the head with a ruler. And they won’t, either, if I have anything to say about it. I’m going to get Mummy and Auntie to help me with my project and it’ll turn out better than anything you ever did.”

“I’ll tell the nuns you cheated. That’s what you are, a cheater!”

“No you won’t, because you’re too afraid of them, and besides, I stood up for you that time we were in the classroom together.”

“What are you talking about, Miriam?” her mother suddenly inquired.

“Oh, the nuns always hit you on the head with a ruler when they don’t like what you’re doing. He’s always in trouble and now he’s trying to get me into trouble. They shouldn’t hit you on the head should they? They might hit him on his soft spot by accident and then his brain could get messed up more than it is already.”

“Now, what are you talking about, Miriam?” her mother sounded disgusted. “Babies have soft spots, boys of seven do not. But you’re right, it’s still dangerous. Wait till Dadi Mary hears about this. She’ll be very angry.”

“Wait till Dadi Mary hears about what?” Dadi shouted from her bedroom window which faced on to the opening in the kitchen courtyard. “Ma Jeeva tells me you want to tell me something.”

“Nothing, Dadi, nothing—we’ll talk about it later.”

For supper all of them except for Dadi moved to the two large rooms that had been built especially for their stay. The rooms were located off one end of the courtyard and away from the main part of the house. One of the rooms was used for sleeping when it was not more comfortable to sleep in the courtyard out of doors. The other room had a huge table in the center of it and was used as a dining room. It was lined with cupboards and counter tops on which there were a tea service, school books and an electric toaster for making toast in the mornings.

The entire house was arranged in a feudal manner. The servants, the cows and the horses all lived in different parts of it. Everything was enclosed by a wall. Everyone had their own private space. Except for one toilet that flushed, in the main part of the house, electricity and the electric toaster were the
house's major modern conveniences. All food was prepared fresh each day, so there was no need for refrigeration. Running water was a luxury and the fresh well water pump that stood on a seven-by-six-foot cement-covered platform created especially for it, was a busy meeting place. Steps led up to it and all bathing during the warmer seasons was done under it. All the major water fights took place in and around it. The house seemed to have been designed for a whole clan or as a house for a larger single family because in one corner there were public bathrooms for men and women built back to back. These rooms consisted of a row of cement blocks for squatting. Dadi's family, who were never considered part of Miriam's, lived up the street. They, in fact, were considered a clan because all the Noors in Pakistan were related to one another and had reunions in their private village. No one but the Noor family was allowed to go to that village. Dadi Mary, who had become a Noor, had gone to their private village. The Noors were extremely fascinating to Miriam not only because her father had lived with them and Dadi had been married to one of them, but also because they were neighbors. Unless she asked, they were never talked about by anyone. The close proximity of the Noor house to theirs spoke of kinship, but the Noors were as devoutly Muslim as Miriam's family was devoutly Christian and this to her seemed to have severed all relations after the death of Dadi Mary's husband.

"What are you thinking about Miriam? You're supposed to be eating," her mother said, busy putting food she had scooped in her fingers into the mouth of one of the younger boys even though he had a plate in front of him.

"I'm thinking about the Noors. I think it was one of them that walked through our garden and I introduced myself. But I don't know if they know who I am. I imagine that if I tell the nuns that I am related to the Noors, they would probably be too afraid to hit me. The Noors have a lot of money and the nuns always act nice if they think they might get money from someone."

"You never talk any sense. The nuns get plenty of money from us for your schooling. Now, your Auntie Rehanna and I will do the sweater project for you because we don't like the fact that the nuns hit children on the head," meanwhile continuing to coax her son to eat.

Miriam felt victorious. She realized that her telling about how the nuns hit children on the head with rulers was effective and that even her mother had been frightened into submission.

"You're always telling me that I'm evil because I steal birds' eggs. You say it's wrong to do that, and now you're getting Mom to knit that girlie thing for you," the younger brother hissed at her with his hands cupped to his mouth. Miriam made a fist and hit him hard on the shoulder.

"Mummy tell him to leave me alone!" Miriam said loudly. She cupped her hand over her mouth and hissed back, "If you don't leave me alone I'll tell Mummy you steal birds' eggs and that you throw
them on the ground and break them.”

The younger brother started crying and shaking his head as Mother tried to stuff another piece of *roti* with sauce into his mouth.

“I don’t want any.” He kept saying. “No. No. No!” Tears were now running down his face as he kept moving his head left to right.

“I’ll eat it,” the older one quickly offered.

Then the middle brother, who was six and usually well-behaved couldn’t keep his peace anymore. He stared at his older brother, shocked.

“You want to eat from Mummy’s hand like a baby?” The whole situation degenerated and the mother and aunt were kept busy separating the three.

After supper she went to see *Dadi*. When *Dadi* heard Miriam’s footsteps she started singing her version of “You Are the Apple of My Eye.” As Miriam came closer she stopped and called out, “Is that you, Miriam? Which one of my children is coming to visit me?”

“Yes it’s me, Dadi, we just finished eating and Aunt Rehanna and Mummy are getting the water heated for the boys’ baths.”

“What were they talking about earlier? What did you say that they wanted to tell me about? Did you get into trouble?” Dadi asked, turning her body so her voice projected toward Miriam who was now standing by her bed.

“Well I am in trouble, but they wanted to tell you something else.”

“You shouldn’t fight with your brothers. You’re the oldest. Look at how your Aunt Rehanna takes care of all her family, and I’ve told you that I took care of my younger brothers and sisters because I was the oldest.”

“I don’t want to take care of my brothers. I don’t like them. I wish I had a sister. It would be more fun, then, having them to play with.”

“Well even if I can’t see, I take care of you, don’t I?”

“Yes but…”

“All right, tell me what else you talked about and while you’re doing that, walk on my back.” This was *Dadi’s* favorite request. She thought Miriam was the right weight to walk all over her body while she lay on her stomach. It was Miriam’s least favorite thing to do for her grandmother because it felt like walking on a very uneven moving surface, but she took off her shoes and stepped on the back.
“Well the thing is, Dadi, that I have to finish a knitting project. I don’t know how and Mummy and Auntie are going to help with it. The other girls’ work looks like their mothers did it. When I try, it looks like a bird’s nest, not nice like Mummy and Auntie’s knitting.”

“You don’t practice enough. Someday you’ll have to run a house and you have to learn to do these things.”

“But you don’t knit and you run a house.”

“I don’t knit, but I used to do needlework when I could see. I have a lot of mats and napkins with patterns on them that haven’t been finished. You can take them out and try it some time. We will get you pretty thread to do it with. Empty hands are the devil’s handiwork.”

Miriam rolled her eyes to heaven, even though they were getting down to what she wanted to talk to her grandmother about.

“Do you think it’s a sin to have them knit those things for me?”

“Sloth is a sin and the only reason you didn’t get it done is because you are lazy. So you’ll have to decide which is better: having the knitting done and getting a good grade, because if your mother and aunt do it you will certainly get a very good grade, or feeling guilty about getting someone else to do the work for you when you should not have been lazy and gotten it done yourself. Now, get off my back and get my bag and read me a psalm.” Her grandmother’s Bibles, Book of Common Prayer and hymnal all hung in a green canvas sack at the foot of her bed. “When we’re done we will sing a hymn together. Which one would you like?”


Dadi started singing the hymn while Miriam looked for her Book of Psalms. She knew she would want her to read Psalm number 23, she was in that kind of mood.

“Read Psalm number 23.”

Miriam didn’t have to read it. She knew it by heart, but she rushed through it looking at the words on the page, and when they got to the part: “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,” the word “evil” took on a new meaning for Miriam. She knew that she had to fear evil for not walking in the path of righteousness. At the time of another reading when she had asked Dadi what “the valley of death” was, she had answered that life was the valley of the shadow of death. Through this valley and life Miriam had to fear the evil of not doing the knitting. Somehow the knitting seemed to her such a little thing which was now throwing an evil shadow over her whole life. She didn’t dare bring up her thoughts again in case she got another lecture in which all the good things promised to the righteous in life and in heaven were going to exclude her because of laziness. She stayed and talked to
Dadi Mary a long time about what she’d done during the day and other news about how the family’s day had gone. However, in the back of her mind was the moral knitting dilemma and she knew that most of what she told Dadi, Dadi already knew about. Her cataracts and other ailments, though they kept her bedridden, kept the rest of the family and the servants Martha and her husband Bihari running in and out of her bedroom. What they didn’t tell her, she usually kept up with from her window and with the help of Ma Jeeva.

When Miriam went outside it was dusk. She stood on the verandah looking down on to the courtyard and watched Bihari, their jack of all trades, carrying the beds from the bedroom on his shoulder and putting them down in the courtyard while his wife Martha followed him with the bedding.

“I heard about your knitting!” Martha said.

“Are they going to do it?” Miriam asked.

“Yes, of course they are. What a silly question. But don’t make anyone angry. Do as I say and I’ll see to it that you don’t get into trouble or they won’t do it. Why don’t I help you take your bath. We won’t wash your hair, but I’ll brush it out for you. As it is, you’ve been gone a long time.” Martha nudged Miriam towards the bathroom.

“I was saying prayers with Dadi. I wasn’t doing anything wrong.”

“Well, hurry up and take your bath. Don’t be a bother. Be all ready for bed when your mother and aunt see you.”

“All right. Are they working on my knitting project right now? Is that why I have to be good?”

“No. They are with the children in the bedroom. They’re wrestling with the boys trying to get them ready for bed, and when they get done and the boys have gone to bed, then they are going to start on your knitting. You’ll see it will only take them an hour to make the booties, sweater and cap,” Martha informed Miriam.

“Oh, the boys will never go to bed. They might lie down but they won’t sleep. They’ll stay up wanting this and that for half the night. And when one finally goes to sleep the other one says something to wake him up.”

“If you want your knitting done, do as I say and don’t make trouble. Don’t complain about the boys and go take your bath.”

Martha brought Miriam out after her bath, going on in a loud voice about what a good job Miriam had done by herself. She sounded as if Miriam had never taken a bath before. Then Martha unbraided Miriam’s hair and began to comb it while she sat on her bed outside. Her mother and Auntie were tucking the boys in. The hair was snarled and Miriam let out a loud “Ow,” but Martha nudged
Miriam with her elbow and told her to keep quiet while she gathered bits of hair in a tight grip and yanked away.

It was still light enough outside to see. In Sargodha, dusk always seemed to last a long time. It was the time when the sun had barely started to go down. Miriam knew that if her mother and aunt wanted to sit outside where they could keep an eye on the children, they still had enough light to see their knitting. Miriam sat on her bed for a while. She really didn’t know how good she was supposed to be. Should she just sit quietly not doing anything? Finally she got up and got a magazine and a book to read.

She read sporadically. She kept thinking about the lack of leadership in her family and how her aunt and mother weren’t concerned about the morality of what they were going to do for her. In anger and confusion she blamed them for not discussing with her how she felt, or taking the time to show her how to knit a long time ago.

She blamed them for encouraging her to be like the boys. Even her brother had called her a cheater. Her family was slowly and steadily wishing her to become a boy. Miriam started crying softly so as not to draw attention to herself. When she turned her head on her pillow and opened her eyes, it was morning.

In surprise, Miriam sat up suddenly and looked down at her body covered by a light cotton spread. Through her blurry eyes she could see, at the foot of her bed, neatly arranged, a yellow baby sweater, cap and booties. There was shiny ribbon running through them. The ribbon was at the top of the booties, around the trim of the cap and up and down the front of the baby sweater.

She ran to the hammam, brushed the bees aside with her arm and turned on the water. She needed to wash her face and clear her head. It was such a surprise getting the sweater and things. Looking at them made yesterday’s problems disappear.

“So, Miriam,” Aunt Rehanna said from inside the bedroom. “How do you like the baby sweater?”

“It’s beautiful. Did you put it at the foot of my bed? I’m washing my face so I can get the sleep out of my eyes. Then I’m going to wash my hands so I don’t dirty it when I touch it.”

“Yes, I put it on your bed so it would be the first thing you saw when you woke up. Don’t worry about your hands, it won’t get dirty.”

The rest of the morning was spent getting ready for school and eating breakfast, with the usual noise and commentary from her brothers. When they finally got into the tonga and Bihari had driven it away from the house nearly to the end of the street, Miriam took out the sweater. When she looked at it she couldn’t believe that anybody could be convinced she had made it herself. It was so perfect that it
looked like it was bought in an expensive store. Miriam was sure that the nuns would get a nice price for it at the bazaar.

A certain discomfort settled over her around the fact that it was not and did not look like it was made by her hands. She could, nevertheless, feel her hands creating it or something like it. Maybe if she had attempted to make it herself it would have seemed to her just as beautiful, even if less perfect. But then she brushed the thought aside.
...And Time, Like A Fan, Collapses

From the beginning, Patricia's life seemed extraordinary and glamorous to Salma like a foreign film.

They had known each other practically all of their lives. They met when they were thirteen in Delhi, India, when both were attending an international school. Patricia lived with her engineer father, stepmother, sister and cousin; her South American mother had returned to South America with her brother-in-law. Salma had always been intrigued by this story, how Patricia's German father, an engineer working in developing countries, had married a South American woman who had in the end run off with his brother. Then Patricia's father married his sister-in-law, brought his niece to live with his children, and started traveling the globe all over again. Salma herself came from a middle-class Indian home: she had a father, a mother, two sisters and a brother and lots of extended family. It was all quite ordinary except that her mother was Austrian.

When they graduated from their international school, Salma left India and went to study music at Oberlin College in Ohio. Patricia decided to go to Berkeley to study marine biology. Somehow both ended up in Madison, Wisconsin to do their graduate work. By then each had already married and divorced. At Madison both of them were very serious about their academic and future careers and being independent women. To relax, which was not often, Patricia took Salma to foreign films, and Salma, in turn, invited Patricia to talk over drinks.

Patricia's life still seemed glamorous to Salma.

Patricia took a new lover every month. After her divorce Salma withdrew into her music. She had many male friends and one particular fantasy affair that spanned four years. Among her male friends were Patricia's rejected lovers, who would come to Salma crying. They were all convinced that they had been more to the beautiful Patricia than just a notch on her bedpost.

One man named Robert got drunk, got into a fight, and lost his front teeth. He was the picture of a destroyed man when he came crying to Salma.

Despite her reservations, Salma was infatuated with her one consistent casual male friend during the four years at Madison. Patricia saw her through her many agonies surrounding this relationship. In her fright Salma would move toward, then recoil from Charles. Charles would feed her infatuation in the same way she fed his. He would seem very interested at times and just as distant at others. Then shortly
before Patricia and Salma had finished their degrees, Charles suddenly and abruptly left Madison to return to the east coast.

“I can’t believe he didn’t care! All those Saturday afternoons he sat at my house quietly listening to me practice. I thought he was more interested than that! I want to get even! “

“What would you like to do?” Patricia asked.

“Well . . . why don’t you seduce him! You don’t care about any of them. Charles and you know each other vaguely. I’m sure he’s just as taken with you as most of the men who meet you. Look what you did to Robert. He started drinking, got into a fight, and lost his two front teeth. He called me at all hours crying that he had to be more to you than an expendable lover. The man was completely destroyed! I saw him one night in the bar. He looked across at me and started crying for his mother!”

“I did that? I don’t think so! I never led him on.”

“No, but when you got done with him he was crying for his mommy. Exactly my point. How would you like to seduce one more? You have a job in Boston and Charles is there. I found out from his department. I have a number for him. Tell him you’re fascinated by him. Tell him that in Madison you admired him from a distance. Let’s make up a story and really pump up his ego. Time wise we’ll have to stretch the whole thing out but we can make it sound good. Let’s let this be our conspiracy.”

“The end result being . . . ?”

“Destruction and broken front teeth!” Salma snapped angrily.

“Are you sure about this? You want me to do something like this? You want to make a conspiracy against Charles . . . who means so much to you?”

“Yes.” Said Salma, thinking she was not taking much of a chance because she knew that recently Patricia had gotten more than just a little interested in someone special. She was pretty sure that Patricia’s new man was important to her but the relationship was still in its germinal stages.

“O.K. Now, you’re sure this is what you want?”

“Yes.” Salma said again, unwavering. She felt there was no chance of Patricia falling in love with Charles. Patricia had yet to fall in love with anyone, and Salma was sure that if she did, it would be with this new man in her life. Yet Charles was so handsome, Salma felt a flutter at the thought that they might become entangled. Salma consoled herself and persisted “Yes.” Patricia had yet to form a long term relationship with anyone.

“O.K. Leave it to me.”

“But keep me posted.” It was a dangerous thing to do, when she looked at the beautiful Patricia running her hands through her thick chestnut hair. Could it possibly happen that Charles and Patricia
would fall in love? Openness between Patricia and herself was the only guarantee of satisfaction. Still even in her anger Salma was starting to doubt what she was doing, the first flush of battle and anger beginning to fade.

Salma graduated six months after Patricia who was already working in Boston. In the back of Salma's mind was always the thought of what she had told Patricia to do but she couldn't come to a clear decision about the plan. On the day of her graduation, she called Patricia to tell her about her Ph.D. dissertation defense. She thought that she would also mention that perhaps she should forget about their little conspiracy.

A man answered the phone and told her Patricia was not home, she was at work and he didn't know when she would be back.

With a shock Salma recognized Charles voice. The whole conversation was over before she could think. She hung up, confused and in tears. It was too late. All her feelings of jealousy welled up inside her.

For days she moved around, dazed and in a fog. Her disintegration started with a mild depression that grew in time to encompass and darken her whole life, but since it did not damage her teaching career she thought she was fine. Teaching gave her enough time alone so that she was able to cover up her illness. For years she went to therapy and went over and over her life, her long friendship with Patricia, the conspiracy and the call. She looked at her problem from every angle but she could not cope with her feelings of intense betrayal. In her pride she never mentioned anything about her agony to Patricia. They started to perform a ritual every two years in summertime. They would take a four day trip to Madison, away from everything in their lives to be together. Salma would come from Santa Barbara, where she taught music at the University of California, and Patricia from Boston, where she did research in biology for a medical company. For years they continued their ritual biennial four day meetings, and brief telephone conversations in between.

Patricia married for a second time and enjoyed a very stable relationship with the man she had started to date when she graduated from Madison. The couple had two children they doted on. Coming to Madison was fun and nostalgic for Patricia because of the many personal changes that she had gone through. For many years these four days had become Salma's only intimate contact with a nurturing loving human being.
They were getting so old that they now called every trip their last. Patricia and Salma sat outside under a coffee shop awning on a hot day fanning themselves.

"Do you ever think of that man Charles?" Patricia asked. "I don't know what made me think of him all of a sudden. But remember when you got so angry and we made that conspiracy?"

Salma's heart stopped. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"I don't think he was very important to you. In all these years you've never mentioned him. You know he and I met once by accident at a conference or something. He even visited me once. I let him tape some of my music collection. But it's just as well that you weren't interested because when I met him in Boston he had just started living with a man. I never thought to mention it because even though you seemed to have gotten over him, I didn't want to upset you."

Patricia fluttered her fan below her eyes as she gazed at Salma. Salma snapped hers shut.
Premonition

The day before my father died I got a telephone call. I was sitting at the gray Formica kitchen table drawing some catalpa leaves. It must have been about noon, the sun was in patches on the wall paper, picking up the colors of the red and green, flower-filled wicker baskets of the paper. The dishes were done, the kitchen was spotless. No one was in the house. It was dead silent as I smeared the charcoal with a rubber eraser, giving the large leaves depth. The phone rang. I answered it. There was a crackling sound as if someone was trying to speak, but I couldn’t hear them. My hellos brought no answer. Finally the person on the other end hung up.

I went back to my drawing, but for some reason I was very anxious. The first thought that came into my mind was that my father had died, and somebody was afraid to tell me. He had very mild angina for which he took medication. He had been hospitalized once for it, but when we went to see him he seemed quite happy. Dad kept playing with the heart monitor: using his yoga to almost stop his heartbeat, making the nurses run into the room to see if he was still alive. During our visit he kept playing with the heart monitor and was proud to show us how he could make the heartbeat drop down to a line. Then he asked my husband for a cigarette. I kept trying to tell him that Camel straights were dangerous for his condition.

“Oh, come on,” he said, “give me one. I haven’t had a cigarette in two days.”

“If the nurses find out, they’ll be very angry!” I said. “It’ll be worse than playing with the heart monitor. They’ll throw you out of here.”

This particular time when I thought my father’s life was in danger I hadn’t worried too much. the doctors had told us the hospitalization was only for tests. After the tests there had been no need to worry. The doctors announced his condition as not very serious. This relieved our fears. These fears actually started when I was six. It was the first time I saw my father die.

My brothers and I had been taken to a college performance of The Bishop’s Candlesticks. My father was one of the actors. It was a little bit hard to follow because it was completely in English. At home we spoke a combination of Urdu and English. I was taught only English at school.

When The Bishop’s Candlesticks was over the set was used as background for a magic show. This show was for the benefit of the children in the audience. A stool was set up in the middle of the stage. Then a magician appeared in a silk top hat. He took the top hat off and showed the audience it was empty inside. He put it on the stool, top down. The magician hit the magic hat with his magic wand and
reached inside. Out of the hat he pulled handkerchief after colored handkerchief, all tied together.

Watching him was fun. Then came the bright, colored flowers. This was followed by numerous card
tricks. For the last trick, the magician pulled a rabbit out of the hat.

When he was done, the magician went offstage and came back with a huge box. He turned the
box around, as he did this he opened up the sides. It was empty. The magician announced that he was
going to put Professor Theodore Khan in the box and saw him in half. My father walked on-stage still
dressed in his cape. He looked majestic in his attire and mustache. He looked like a magician himself.
The magician opened the box and my father sat down in the center of it. Then he put his feet up and sat
up with his legs in the box. Slowly he lay down. I was watching all this from the auditorium seats. It
wasn’t very clear to me what sawing someone in half meant. I thought that my father was coming on-
stage to do another magic trick. But slowly I began to put the words in English and what my father was
doing together.

Turning to my mother, I asked, “If they saw him in half, what about his children?”

“Sh. Sh.”

I turned a face, whose features were becoming taut and frozen, to the stage. My whole body
began to shake and tears started to form in my eyes. The magician closed the box on all sides. I couldn’t
see anything but my father’s beautifully groomed head with the white color added to his sideburns. He
was so tall, much more than his feet was hanging out the other end. A little smaller box, and he could
have bent his knees and let his feet dangle to the ground. The magician took the saw and began cutting
the box in half. Before my very eyes and with the consent of my mother and the audience my father was
being sawed in half. Because my mother had shushed me, I didn’t scream out as I saw my father die.

When the magician was all done he pulled out the ax. Then he waved a black cloth over the
whole box. He snapped the box open and my father was lying there, whole. But I knew if someone
touched him he would come apart in half. He lay very still. The magician ordered him to stand up. The
ghost of my father sat up and moved his legs forward stiffly. When it had both feet planted on the
ground, it stood up, and coming clear of the box, lowered from the center. But the top half, extended to
the audience, didn’t fall off. The ghost then stood up tall to his 6’3” height and shook his arms slightly.
The audience applauded and he smiled. The magician announced when the commotion had died down
that he had done the magic trick with the professor because his children were in the audience.

There was another time, when I was eleven, that he had gotten very sick. We had just come back
to Pakistan from the US and he couldn’t seem to adjust to the tropical climate. He had been away a long
time, six years or so, and became very ill. He kept losing weight, and running high temperatures. His
doctor friends wouldn't exactly discuss the case with me, but I knew he was very sick. I fretted and worried. At mealtimes I would look at his empty chair. The food in my mouth would become uncomfortable to swallow. I would choke on the tears, then on the food. Even though he was lying in the next room, I was convinced that he would never eat with us again.

Then I overheard a conversation between his doctor, and my mother. The white blood cell count was extremely high, dangerously so. If they couldn't bring it down he might have more problems than what he already had. That was the end, for me. I was convinced he had leukemia. I had learned about this disease from watching Dr. Kildare and Ben Casey on American television. If it wasn't leukemia, it was some other terminal illness and he was going to die. I kept the suspicions to myself. I needed proof or a sign that he was going to be all right, so I asked my mother if he could get up and eat with us. He said he would try.

When he came to the table, I kept my eyes down, concentrating on my plate. He was sweating, his hair was in disarray. He would lift his hands slowly to touch his face. My father kept watching me, from the head of the table, since I was sitting across from him.

“What's wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” I mumbled, but unfortunately I had put a piece of food in my mouth and in the usual vicious circle I choked on it.

He lost his patience and almost seemed frightened. His eyes looked like they were going to jump out of his head. “Tell me. What's wrong?” he cried out at me. Usually when he raised his voice to me, I would withdraw, refuse to interact with him. I knew he loved me, but I didn't have much empathy with him when he yelled. And he yelled often, especially at my younger brother. As a matter of fact, he had a horrible and explosive temper. My father, even if he wasn't yelling at you, could be nasty. But, since he didn't have long to live, I decided to humor him with a response.

Through my tears I asked him, “Are you going to die?”

“Oh, this is really wonderful. I come to eat with you, because you asked me to, and now you want to know if I'm going to die. No I'm not going to die!”

“But Dr. McCaulley said your white cell count was really high. Which means you have leukemia. So, if he can't bring the white cell count down, you're going to die. I asked Mother and she says the white cells eat the red cells. If you don't have enough red cells, then you die. So, if your white cells eat all your red cells, you won't have any blood, because blood is red. And you're going to die!” I was making the best of what I knew was going to be one of my last conversations with him.
“Stop crying, and choking on your food! I’m not going to die. I don’t have leukemia.” He was crying. Either the effort of talking to me was frustrating, or he was just exasperated by his weakness, wishing he were stronger so he could strangle me. He didn’t suffer fools lightly. Maybe he was just caught up in the emotions of the moment. “What’s the matter with her?” he asked, looking at Mother. “Can’t she see I’m sick? Now she’s upsetting herself, and me. I can’t take much more of this.” He got up, left the table, and went back to his bed.

Neither he nor I gave in graciously. I had learned drama from him. He usually kept this localized to his family. Mine was uncontrollable. My sister said recently, “What good is it to have a great tragedy if you can’t share it.” She was talking about our mother, but I don’t think she’s quite right, about Mother, that is. What she did put her finger on was something inherent in the nature of drama, the different ways a scene can be played out, especially in our family.

I told some people at school that my daddy was going to die of leukemia. I explained about the white cells again. And people came to see him, to say goodbye. They were very concerned about his health. He was very gracious to them and smiled. He patiently explained that he did not have leukemia and that he would be better soon. His medication was working. His white cell count was high, but it was inevitable with the disease. When the people were gone, at last, he was too worn out to take me on. At any rate, I started feeling better, somehow, as I hid in my room next door to the living room and listened to the conversations, finally realizing that he wasn’t going to die. Of course, had he regained his strength overnight, he would probably have felt no remorse at threatening to end my life and would have done so gladly, knowing that I had caused strangers to visit his house, to say goodbye to him, a man who was a very private person and not particularly well known by any of them. Nevertheless, until the day people had come to share in my grief, and my father had set them straight, I was absolutely demolished by the thought of his death. I wouldn’t and couldn’t accept that my father was not going to die. And the tears I shed were endless and private, even if some of my grieving was not.

So, as I sat at the kitchen table at twenty-five rubbing a piece of charcoal between the fingers of one hand and nervously kneading the eraser with the other hand, my worst nightmare, the loss and death of my father, was enveloping me like a fog.

The doorbell rang. My friend Bob was at the door.

“I came to help Alex with his butterfly book. When’ll he be home from school?” Bob was writing the book as my son dictated the story and painted beautiful watercolor pictures to go with it.

While we waited for Alex to come home from his half-day at school, I told Bob about the strange experience I’d just had. He listened, but thought I was putting too much energy into the situation.
“Look, Ann, it was just a damn phone call. Probably a wrong number. Why get so worked up about it? Are you a psychic?”

“No, Bob, I’m not a psychic, and I don’t believe in that sort of thing. Do you think I should call home? Just to check in and make sure everything’s all right? Actually, I’d rather not know. Maybe I’ll just wait. I talked to my dad last night and he seemed fine. As a matter of fact, he was his usual, protective self. Told me not to walk home in the dark alone.”

“Well, do whatever makes you feel good. What were you drawing?”

“I’m going to do a portrait of Sharon, because I can have her as a model anytime. Just her head. But behind her head I’m going to make a design of catalpa leaves and flowers.” Sharon had been my housemate since I had divorced my husband and she had left hers.

“Very Matisse-like, don’t you think?” The conversation moved towards art.

“I doubt if Matisse had a passion for the catalpa tree outside his front door, one that sheds beautiful white, bell-like flowers with little lavender veins embedded in the cups.”

“Oh, really? That doesn’t even make any sense. Matisse does beautifully decorative things with plants.”

“Oh, come on, Bob, I just don’t like to be compared to Matisse. That guy was a genius. And, anyway, what I mean is that I have a thing for the tree outside my door. And I’m not sure I can translate it into some universal, decorative design.”

“Oh, you’re just full of it. All about your random patterns in the universe, and the leaves falling in a random pattern on concrete. I still say you’re very influenced by Matisse. What you’re afraid of is that it’s just plain academic and sort of an imitation. But look, my paintings are an imitation of Johns’. He’s my teacher, and I guess I just like his stuff.”

“Well, I think what Alex and you’re doing with the butterfly book is really art. I wish I could be that fresh, and not just locked into some Matisse-like, decorative leaf-worship. Nobody gets it anyway, except that I know I really have a thing for the catalpa tree outside my house. Art is something you don’t talk about, I guess,” bored, I ended my part of the discussion with this limp conclusion: if you can’t explain something, say it’s inexplicable.

I was saved by Alex, who took off for his bedroom with Bob to work on their book.

A day later, my father was dead. Suffering mild angina, nobody could imagine that he would die so suddenly of a massive coronary.
When I got the call from my sister, I didn't quite believe he was dead, so I packed Alex off to his friend, Jarod's, asking Carol, Jarod's mother, to take care of him. I said I didn't know how sick my father was, that I didn't know what I would have to do to take care of the rest of my family, as I wanted to protect Alex from the shock of the disappearance of the second, real, male figure in his life. At the time, it seemed like the right and only thing to do.

I lived fifty miles away from my parents. It was a long drive and Sharon drove all the way. The premonition the day before and reality blended. In my mind, my father had been dying for days. I kept visualizing a cloaked figure, a skeleton holding a telephone to its ear. It kept calling me without saying anything. I hardly talked to Sharon, and when I did, I kept saying that maybe this had all been a mistake. Maybe the call from my sister wasn't a definite end to my father's life. Maybe the doctors had resuscitated my father after the call. Maybe.

The road seemed to wind endlessly. At the same time, everything seemed to be rushing forward, rushing towards a resolution that was coming too fast for me. When I looked out the window, the fields seemed to blend with the sky, and the cloaked figure appeared everywhere.

When we got into town, Sharon had to slow down. I looked out the window as the square, low buildings came into focus. We automatically stopped at stoplights and tried to find our way to the hospital. I thought it was this way, then that, and finally we came to a building close to the park that I recognized. The emergency entrance to which my father had been taken was nothing but a long driveway with space for maybe five cars. The building stood alongside the driveway. It was small and square, like the rest of the town, with wide double doors. We parked the car and walked in. The reception area went in and out of focus. As we went in, I placed a hand over my eyes to shield them from the bright overhead lights, even though I knew it hadn't been dark outside. Still, the shock hurt my eyes. It felt as if I'd been crying a long time.

Standing under the lights was a family friend. He was waiting for me.

"Roger, where is my father?" I asked him.

He clasped me in his arms and said, "He's gone."

It was a tight hug. My hands over Roger's shoulder were covered with charcoal, and my face was probably smeared with the white pastel I'd used for the catalpa flowers. Roger's rather fine nose flared when he repeated, "He's gone." I didn't really understand what he meant.

"Where's my dad?"

"He's dead, Ann."

I was irritated. I'd already been told he was dead.
“I thought the ambulance took him to the hospital, so, if he’s gone, someone must have taken him home,” I reasoned.

Finally, through my incoherence and Roger’s trying to comfort me, something clear emerged. My father had been taken to one of the two funeral homes. Is that what they did when someone died? Didn’t they wait for a family member to come and claim the body? Someone had to okay this, but could it be done without the family’s permission? All of this was too much for me to comprehend. I couldn’t believe that someone had okayed his going to the funeral home before I’d had a chance to see him. I had to verify with my own eyes that he had really died. Now everything seemed so cold and impersonal. It seemed to me that death was something you had to go through and, like any major event in life, it should be shared. Someone should hold the dead in their arms and tell them that everything’s going to be all right.

Sharon and I rushed to the funeral home. I ran up to the front door and rang the bell. Mr. Johnson came to the door and stopped me. I tried to push past him into the passageway.

“Where is my father, Mr. Johnson?”

Mr. Johnson put both his hands flat against my shoulders to stop me.

“You can’t see him now, Ann. He’s in the embalming room being prepared.”

“Are you draining his blood?” I asked.

“Yes,” Mr. Johnson answered.

Visions from my biology classroom of little animal fetuses swimming in jars of formaldehyde came to mind. I thought of my mother. I asked if she had requested anything. Had she requested that the body be moved from the hospital to be prepared in a funeral home?

My father was being disposed of, preserved. In one hour he had become part of things done to him, things in which he had no say, no role. Even if my father had left instructions there was no time to open them, because he was already at the funeral home. What if he had wanted to donate his body to science?

“What did my mother want?” I asked out loud.

Mr. Johnson told me that neither she nor any other member of my family had said anything. It made me stop for a moment and ask myself what wishes my mother would have, what traditions she would like to have followed. What would make her most comfortable? Would she want the body home for three or four days? This was impossible, now.

For me, my father’s death would become a way of confronting what I knew of my own culture. This is when, standing in front of Mr. Johnson, thinking about my mother, I came up with homogenous
bits and pieces of myths. These were about preparing the soul to leave the body. My father and mother were born into Christianity. Their grandparents had been converted by British and Irish missionaries. Occasionally my parents would have priest friends come to visit. They came from the Christian village where my grandfather had settled. When they came to visit us in the city, they would tell stories. One of these told me by an Irish priest was about leaving the dead at home for three days. This gave the soul time to leave the body. The present situation could hardly be called a preparation for an Irish wake, but I requested that Mr. Johnson wait three days before doing anything to my father. I knew how important the departure of the soul would be to my mother.

I remember only one other death. It was the death of Uncle Naju, our friend and priest. He always came to our house after church services at Christ Church. It always seemed he was in his pajamas but, in fact, what he wore under his robes were shorts. This was a form of European dress that wasn’t often seen in Pakistan on an adult male, except as night clothes. The informality of his attire always amused us children. It seemed that he must have felt very comfortable with our family to come dressed like that. There is probably a lot of truth to this. He was a very good friend of our parents and had baptized all five of us into the Church of England.

One Sunday, he didn’t drive up in his old, black car. My parents weren’t overly concerned, thinking that he probably had some parish duties to attend to. We all, however, noticed his absence. Around two that afternoon, someone came over to tell us that he was dead.

Everybody was shocked. He had died of a heart attack. My father said he hadn’t known that Naju had been under pressure, otherwise, perhaps, he could have helped by talking with him. I offered my thoughts. Since Naju had been hoping to move from his parish in Rawalpindi to become bishop in Lahore, presiding over a larger parish, perhaps the shock of being turned down and finding that another priest had been offered the position had killed him. My father, standing by the fire in the living room, leaning against the mantelpiece, pondered this carefully. Then he said I might be right.

The following day we went to pay our respects to Uncle Naju at the parsonage of Christ Church. Uncle Naju was lying on a knee-high jute bed in the living room. He was not wearing a suit, but a shalwar kameez, which is a pair of pants and a long white shirt. Usually, like my father, he wore European clothes. This attire was saved for night dress. He had a white piece of cloth wrapped around his jaw and tied to the top of his head to keep his jaw from opening, I learned later. People were sitting in a circle around him. They were silent, wrapped in their own thoughts. Occasionally the mourners would whisper to one another.
The whole scene didn’t hold my attention for long. I went in search of his three daughters. I found them in their father’s bedroom making the bed. The oldest, was in college and about ten years older than I. I told her I didn’t know what to make of the situation in the living room. Uncle Naju’s ghost was, at this moment, probably in the bedroom benignly watching over us. There was no question in my mind that priests went straight to heaven. However, there was that time lapse when one who was dead got ready for this transformation. This didn’t appeal to me much. It was fine for Uncle Naju to watch over his daughters, but I was certain that soon he would be able to see the past and the present, able to see me drinking his altar wine and praying by the banyan tree outside the church. This tree, with its roots high up, hanging down like a short skirt, of which only a few grew down to the trunk, was holy to me. I worshipped it in the way of another pagan ritual, that of eating someone’s body and drinking someone’s blood. My ritual was to sit in the hammock formed by the tree’s branches and think about all the magical powers I had just harnessed by incorporating tree-worship and churchly worship.

The oldest daughter suggested that if I was having problems visiting the body, I should just pray. This was hard to do since I couldn’t sit in the banyan. Going to the tree would undoubtedly be a giveaway to Uncle Naju, if he didn’t already know, that I had a rather confused and personal religion. I went out to play with their wild chipmunks instead. They would come down to eat nuts from your hands and kiss you on the lips.

This was the only experience of death that I had to extrapolate from.

When I got home, I found my mother completely broken. She was sitting on the living room couch. Her friends, Jane and Emma, were sitting close to her, holding her hand. My brother, Ben, was sitting on Dad’s ottoman next to them. My brother, Ron, was standing close to the foyer watching her. My mother’s long hair, in a bun most of the time, often had curly wisps of young hair that strayed out, causing her to say, “I look like a witch,” if she wasn’t careful in her grooming. On this day, the wisps were straying everywhere. The orange couch cover had come undone. The old, ugly, beige fabric underneath was showing. There were other people scattered in the front three rooms. They sat or stood in the living room, the dining room and the smaller study. This was my father’s study only in name, because he had actually done all his work up in his bedroom while listening to the radio, tuned in to a classical station, or else while listening to his reel to reel tapes. Ever since I’d known him, he had always had a shortwave radio, although when he came to America he’d given it up.

I stood in the foyer of the living room taking everything in. My mother looked at me from across the room and said, then repeated, crying, “Anna, he’s gone, he’s gone…” her face was swollen and red. I
didn’t know how to get through to her. Finally, I marched past all the people, cleared a place for myself beside her, put my arm around her shoulder and held on hard. I was a firm believer that by contact you could give another person your strength and health. Holding her, I kept hoping she would respond and get a hold of herself, but instead she kept saying, “You have to be strong,” through her tears. I realized that this time I couldn’t hold on to another person and pass my strength to them. Out of respect, I stopped myself from responding, “You have to be strong,” and I sat there, holding her, for a long time. When she finally seemed a little calmer, I let go and gave her back to Jane and Emma.

I had peripherally noticed my brothers and sister when I had been in the living room. They had acknowledged me from somewhere in the rooms, mumbling they were glad I was there. When I had first walked in and been greeted by people, I hadn’t realized that my attention had been turned exclusively to my mother. Now I felt I had to find my brothers and sister and see if they needed me to hold them. Ron had moved into the kitchen and was surrounded by friends. The friends and he stood around awkwardly.

“I’m glad you’re here, Ann,” he said as I came up to give him a hug.

“You know, I went to the hospital, but I found out Dad had been moved, so I went to the funeral home. I wondered who told Mr. Johnson that Dad should be moved, or is that just the way it’s done here?”

“Where’s Alex?” Ron asked.

“He’s back home. I really didn’t believe that Dad had died, so I left him with a friend. Even if I’d believed it, I didn’t know how much I’d have to do here, and then, I didn’t feel that I could take care of Alex, too.”

“Was that wise?” asked Ron.

“I don’t know, I guess I’m just trying to protect him.” Ron, I remembered, had asked where Alex was as I walked in the front door, but I hadn’t had a chance to explain. “Did anybody call Don?”

“Yes, we already called him, he’s on his way.”

“Where’s Ben?”

“He’s in the living room with Mom, didn’t you see him when you came in?”

“Yes, I saw both of you, but I was really concerned about Mom.”

“We’re all concerned about Mom, Ann,” said Ron.

“I guess you probably haven’t left her side since this happened . . . what about Christine?

“She’s taking it pretty hard, but then, what can you expect?”
I walked out of the kitchen and into the dining room where Christine was sitting with some people who were comforting her.

"How are you doing, Chris?"
"I'm glad you're here, Ann."
"Do you want to come into the kitchen with Ron and me?"
"No," she sobbed, "I'm fine."

I looked into the living room, and Ben was still sitting on the ottoman near Mother. Ron's friends left by the kitchen door and he followed me back into the living room. My brothers were both silent. Occasionally they moved around the living room, but mostly they stayed close to Mother. People would come in and go out. Christine's friends also came. She was quite tall for her eleven years, and her friends now seemed little in comparison. Jane and Emma told me they would be back with food, so neither Mother nor I would have to worry about that kind of thing. Sharon went around talking to people and being hospitable. Everybody seemed to be suffering from shock.

I called Carol, Jarod's mother, to say that. "I don't know if I can get away to bring Alex to the funeral. Do you mind keeping him for as long as this takes. No longer than four days."

Carol said she didn't mind, "Take all the time you need."

I asked Ron if he would like to go get Alex. I didn't know if Dad had allowed him to drive his car. I was sure he had a driver's license. He was done with high school and was in college. Dad had had all sorts of rules about driving, especially his car, and Ron was still living at home. I didn't really know how much the rules had changed for the younger ones. Ron said he didn't want to take the responsibility. What if something happened on the drive, an accident?

"Well Ron, if you have an accident, nothing better happen to my son. It'll be your responsibility. You can take Sharon's car."

"No thanks, Ann!"

Ron and I talked about how death was permeating everything, and how death perhaps would suddenly snatch others of us.

We sat around the dinner table, in the dining room. My mother sat at the head and I at the foot, my usual place. There was no color in the house, everything seemed gray. Once or twice I looked out the dining room window, and the sun seemed to be shining. Then there was a yellow skirt and more grayness. People came in a steady stream all through the morning. They seemed to know precisely why they were there: to encourage the mourning process by talking about the dead, and to bring food. There
was a low hum of conversation and muffled sniffles, out of which Emma addressed me, clearly. She asked whether my brother, Don, was the oldest. I didn’t answer.

My mother said, “She’s in shock, she doesn’t hear you. No, Ann is the oldest.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that, or I should know that but somehow I always forget,” Emma said.

Her comments died into the hum. The family was wrapped in its own confusion and sorrow. My brothers sat around silently. My youngest sister was hysterical. She couldn’t quite reconcile herself to the death. She had been the one to try to revive my father after he fell out of his chair.

At one point my brother, Ron, and I found ourselves sitting together in the living room. I was sitting in Dad’s worn brown leather chair, and he was sitting on the matching ottoman. I reached for his hand, and held it hard in mine. Only a traumatic situation like this could have made him accept having his hand held a long time.

We waited for my oldest brother, Don, but, as with Dad’s death, I cannot remember when or what day he arrived. What I do remember is standing in the kitchen leaning against the kitchen sink. A few of us were gathered around, knitted close together. Angie, Don’s wife, stood at the opposite end of the room near the kitchen table. She looked as if she couldn’t decide whether to come in all the way or stay close to the back stairs. The other people had gone.

“You should have waited for me before you did anything,” Don muttered at me in anger. My aunt, my father’s youngest sister, reached out a hand to stroke his forearm. He accepted the touch but it seemed to fuel his anger.

“You had no right to go ahead without me. You didn’t even think to wait and consult me. You didn’t consider my opinions or how I would feel. Who are you to take charge...who told you, you could go ahead...who do you think you are?”

I tried to answer, but I was silent, the argument grew. I rarely cry. I have a philosophy about crying. To cry is to show weakness, because crying makes one vulnerable to the other person, which in turn humiliates. Don was doing a good job of humiliating me. Tears came to my eyes.

My aunt kept trying to stop him but he kept yelling. As the oldest Pakistani son, he always felt he had rights that were being taken away from him. Actually, my father gave me a lot of independence and some of the rights of the eldest son, and always had, but was much more antagonistic to Don’s rights as the oldest Pakistani son. My mother kept to tradition. She tried to nurture Don more because of my father’s neglect. I knew that my father favored me, but only within the limits he set on women’s independence.

He kept yelling, “Why didn’t you wait for me, I’m the oldest, why were things done without me?”
My aunt kept saying, “Leave her alone!”

Emma, mother’s friend who kept forgetting I was the oldest would understand this, I thought, concentrating on the gray of the kitchen cabinets. Even though I had grown up in an Islamic country, things in America, at least in a small midwestern town, weren’t so different. As a matter of fact, I was more liberated intellectually when I got to the US than most of my classmates in high school, and this I had to attribute to my father. Emma was a psychologist and the kind of educated woman who got noticed in our family.

I said, “Look, I had to be in control, there was nobody else, and Dad had already been taken to the funeral home, what could I do? Anyway I’m the oldest.” For the first time between his ravings I cried deep sobs. My aunt held me.

“Leave her alone, “ she said.

“Nobody’s paid much attention to me,” I said “and now, when somebody finally does, it’s in this horrible way.”

I cried holding on to myself. I ordered my brother’s wife who still stood at the edge of the room, silently listening, to take him out of the room.

“Why don’t you go up to Dad’s room and try to get close to him,” I said to Don with a sneer as Don was led out of the room.

Mr. Johnson called, he wanted to know what clothes we wanted Dad to wear. I went to Don and asked him what he wanted to do. He was sullen and uncommunicative. The argument and the finality of the death were affecting his demeanor. Finally he admitted he didn’t care.

It seemed to me that this was the one task that my brother should be involved with. In a way, I was also trying to help the process on an emotional level by bringing on the inevitable confrontation with the finality of his death. I coerced my two younger brothers into going to the bedroom, at least. Ron, like my father, but in a different way, was into fashion. He wore strange red-checkered jackets and other seventies concoctions. All this couldn’t be farther from me, but this time I wanted to bury my old argument with my father about appearances and pick something he would have for a momentous occasion. Don had really antagonized him by growing his hair long, and I by wearing sweatshirts and jeans. Once I tried to sneak out of the house in an oversized army shirt trying to pass it off as a mini skirt. We would sit around the dining room table for our more formal Sunday dinners after church and discuss things, many things.

“Appearances, are very important,” Dad would say looking around him, usually as a jibe to us.
“Appearances are not so important,” I would argue. “Not to attempt to see the inside of a person is hypocritical.”

“I’m not a hypocrite!” my father would say. “But what is the ‘inside of a man?’ It is not something you can see or touch.” We had played out the generation gap through hair and clothing.

It didn’t take long for Ben, the baby of the family, to dash out of my father’s bedroom. Ron stood in the center of the room not knowing what to do. I asked him to start by picking some of the best suits. He fumbled around the closet a little and then sat down on the bed, while I went through drawers looking for under clothes. Eventually he moved to the closet again and picked out three or four of the best suits. Determined to make a concession to how Dad would have liked to appear, and not really willing to give up and share my father’s last moments with anyone, I asked, “Doesn’t he have a sharkskin suit,” even though I couldn’t have recognized one even if he had already pulled it out.

And Ron, not willing to give in to my quick decision, nor privy to my thoughts, kept asking me, “Why did you pick that one? It’s too good a suit!”

“That isn’t very nice, Ron,” I said, turning it around on him. “Anyway, it’s his suit!”

We both agreed on one thing: this was enough for a while, and since Ben wouldn’t help to pick a suit, he would be the one to deliver the clothes to the funeral home. In the end, I don’t know which one of them took the clothes over.

Sharon and I had been over to the funeral home already to pick a coffin and I couldn’t face going again. We didn’t really have many choices because he was a tall man, and there were only a few large enough. They were in a well-lit room full of white Chrysanthemums that made a wonderful complement to the white satin of the coffin interiors. I tentatively touched one of the shiny white pillows, and when it gave way soft and comfortable, I quickly withdrew my hand as if something had bitten it. I was terrified of ghosts and being in this room full of shiny, new-cushioned boxes, reminded me of the nights I had been in the upstairs apartment of the funeral home with Sandy, Mr. Johnson’s daughter and my high school friend, irreverently eating party food and listening to loud music.

One night I had answered the door for Mr. Johnson and let in a man who wanted to talk to him. The next morning, trying to get over my fear, I went to look at the body in the parlor. I screamed when I recognized the man I’d let in the night before. I was very confused by what I saw and Sandy was very nonchalant. She could walk through a room with a body in it in her pajamas drinking a Coke and munching on pizza. She had seemed unable to comprehend my fear and wouldn’t pay much attention to it. So she wasn’t much help in clearing up the fact of how a live man had walked in, and next morning been half-entombed. I asked her if maybe the man at the door wasn’t a twin of the one lying in the
coffin. But he had no twin. And then, in the end, remembering experiences with ghosts from my childhood, I gave myself a rational explanation: it'd been a close relative of a close relative. Maybe the man at the door had been an old-looking nephew of the dead man.

Since I was a child I'd known spirits were hiding in trees waiting to frighten me. The good spirits called “gin” would play alongside the bad spirits, “bhooth”. They would wait in the nettles of the lemon trees lining the front courtyard, or hide in the three-acre fruit and vegetable garden behind our house in Sargodha. Some of the good ghosts were members of my own family. I had seen them in my grandmother's room, five by seven and eight by twelve photographs of the faces of her dead sisters. They looked like pictures of living people. Nobody liked me to explore the box under her dressing table, but I did anyway. What use were they to Grandma? She was old and couldn't see very well. The fact that these pictures were taken and I could look at these death masks proved to me that my great aunts' essence had been captured. They moved around the trees and played with me, sometimes I would grasp at the air with both arms to catch them.

The “bhooths” were snakes and monsters that left trails of smoke that could be formed into any monstrous shape they chose. I shrank away when I felt them in the trees, especially at dusk when they were first starting to come out and I was still outside playing.

Yet, since “gin” and “bhooth” are words not necessarily having to do with benign spirits, but more the evil kind, I couldn't always keep them separate. And it was possible for them, both the “gin” and the “bhooth,” to come after me at night in their ominous and monstrous shapes.

The family, who were scattered everywhere, had to be called: England, Germany and Pakistan. This was an unpleasant task because my father hadn't been speaking to some of them. Tracking them down wasn't easy. The addresses were incomplete. Sending telegrams would have been a waste of time. I was searching for some connection, some comfort. With raised expectations about how they would react towards me, I found only one composed aunt and one uncle who wanted to know if I was Don, and who kept a conversation going with someone else in the background about horses and stables. By now I was getting good at delegating authority, so I requested that my aunt notify people in Scotland and others in England, and if she could, send a telegram to Pakistan, because I could only find incomplete addresses. If there were some other address books, I didn't want to bother my mother by asking her where they were. She had directed me once, incoherently, to the top drawer of my father's black desk in his study.

Within the three days before the body was actually to be prepared, the family seemed calmer. Finally, the moment came when Mr. Johnson, having made use of the sharkskin suit, displayed Dad in the front room of the funeral parlor. He called us in the morning and said that if we would like to see him,
he was ready. We stood around the kitchen not sure what we were going to do next. We weren't sure we would go to see him. But then we discussed it, and I suggested that we might want to see him because we might regret later not doing this. If we did go, we'd go together, we decided. It didn't take us long to agree to go, but we wouldn't go until the afternoon when we'd had a chance to pull ourselves together. It was to be only brothers and sisters. As for Mom, somebody else would have to take her. I certainly knew I couldn't face watching her deteriorate in front of my eyes when she actually saw Dad. Being with us, she would collapse, but being with one of her friends, she would have to hold on to herself. And then, if Don really desperately wanted to take control, he could take Mom.

There he was laid out in a coffin the color of his car. Dad liked his car, although he'd drive it and forget it places and walk home. Later he'd realize that he'd forgotten his car, and we would call him the absent-minded professor. We stood on one side of the brown metallic box. It certainly looked like Father, very well dressed, lying in a box, with his arms over his midriff and his fingers crossed. I kept looking at the thumb. His hands and thumbs looked like mine. So this is what my hands would look like in death. But it seemed so natural, as if he were lying on his bed, taking a nap. I then looked hard at the back of his neck. Mr. Johnson had told me that there was some swelling there and that the collar of the shirt wouldn't fit. He'd had to open the collar at the back, but it was not apparent. Dad looked as if he might wake up any minute.

I didn't like the fact that he was confined.

We stayed maybe five minutes. We had seen what we had come to see. We had never discussed that I was scared of ghosts, but I knew that because this was a familiar one, he would have more reason to haunt me if things weren't done just so. And the ghosts of my family and my own past were hanging heavily on me in attempts to bring everyone together over the death.

Home for me is often defined by when and where I meet my family, rather than a certain place. And my father, whom I went to see quite often on weekends, was the closest to my sense of home. But with his death we had permanent roots in the soil of America.
The house, property no. 32, is silent and empty. Everybody including the servants are up the street at no. 28 Civil Lines in Abbotabad, Pakistan for a party. Hanna’s brother Anwar’s son has just returned from his honeymoon.

Hanna sits at the back of the verandah on the storage room steps. She watches at the other end far away the falling sun’s pattern mirrored on the wall of her sleeping quarters. On the red brick of the verandah is a king size piece of cloth with a huge white Butterfly Lily pattern that Hanna is having made into a comforter to take back to London in a week. Flamboyant hummingbirds are buzzing around the pomegranate flowers and their nest.

As she watches the pattern of the sunset on the wall she hears laughter and the clinking of ankle bracelets and then sees an apparition of four dancing girls. Two are dressed in old Indian costumes, two are dressed in a purple Shalwar Kameez.

“So strange to be here in this old house,” says one of the dancers to the others, while they twirl, bend and raise their arms swaying.

“She is here. She has come to visit us, after all this time . . . after nearly thirty years. Arnold serves his function well . . . he does a good job taking care of our properties.” The dancing girls keep chatting amongst themselves.

Hanna watches the talking mirage, mesmerized, many memories, thoughts, and visions run through her confused mind. She tries to follow one thread, forcing herself to make sense.

One of the dancing girls mocks Hanna’s thoughts, and teasingly says: “As a psychiatrist I should be able to make sense of this.”

“Nothing has happened!” Hanna says out loud. Nothing at all!” She runs through the events in her mind. She has come home to her grandmother’s house for a family gathering to be part of a wedding party.

“Today the children danced. We ate.” Hanna shakes her head as if to clear it. She looks down at her body, and her hand comes up. She makes a gesture of confusion and emptiness. Again she tries to follow one thread of her thoughts forcing herself to focus.

“It must be because of something I ate or the heat that I am having these illusions. It was because I was too full to do anything but lie down that I came back to no. 32.”
“Come... Come...“ say the girls. “Come dance with us. Dance like we used to when we were children. Don’t you remember us?”

Hanna doesn’t know if she should interact with these illusions. Among her thoughts are flashes of her patients. She tries, as with word association, to focus on one, but can’t.

“How about Roxanne?” Say the dancing girls “She belly dances. But really you need time away from your work. Come... come... dance with us.”

Hanna looks at the dancing girls and smiles, she decides here is a thread she can follow, analyze. Let the dancing girls talk about Roxanne. She will play the game of these things, interact with these ghosts.

“Yes.” She looks at the dancing girls and says, “Yes. I do wish I could have brought her here.”

The dancing girls laugh, form a circle, and go around.

Roxanne’s life was so far removed from Hanna’s in education, money, indulgence and comfort. Roxanne was about Hanna’s age, 52 years old. She was getting her Ph.D. after years of working out her emotional and physical problems in therapy. She had in the past ten years come into her own.

Roxanne now saw Hanna infrequently. She suffered from depression for which she took medication—30 milligrams of Prozac every other day. She tried to go off the medication occasionally and would eventually start to have mood swings. She would then return to Hanna crying, emotionally distraught but well groomed and manicured. She wore large exotic earrings placed carefully among her dangling curls and would be enveloped in silk scarf skirts made in her favorite colors—purple and sea green. She seemed the picture of health.

Hanna didn’t want to deal with Roxanne’s problems unless Roxanne could control herself emotionally. She put her back on medication.

For a while Roxanne came back, trying to deal with problems surrounding her history of abuse as a child. One of Roxanne’s frustration was that she could not trust a man but she wanted and needed so much to have a close physical attachment. At the same time she was embarrassed to admit this because she believed herself to be a feminist. The man Roxanne was now involved with she felt would be her last. Because of her age she believed she had started to become less and less appealing to men.

She wasn’t interested in a commitment, however, not with the present man or perhaps not with any man, but especially not with this one. He never talked, was working class and un-intellectual, and yet Roxanne’s desire was so great that together they were going to a family therapist trying to see if they could work their problem out.
“I’ve been married to Arnold for over thirty years,” Hanna says to the dancing girls. “Most of which I’ve lived in London with our two children . . . “

“Come and dance, be like Roxanne, Come join us . . . “ the apparition titter at Hanna.

“Arnold has lived in Pakistan taking care of his and my financial affairs.” Hanna ignored their pleading.

“We know all that . . . come and dance. Belly dance like Roxanne.” The dancing girls beckoned and twirled and laughed.

“I couldn’t and wouldn’t for the sake of my independence give up any of these conveniences and comforts. I have enjoyed my independence, money, status and work.” Focused and single minded Hanna attacked the mirage. But as she continued deeper into her self analysis a forbidden thought came into her mind. She had not known deep love between a man and woman. Arnold’s and her’s had been a semi-arranged marriage in the sense that they had known and liked each other a little before their families agreed upon an arrangement. It was a business contract for the purpose of bearing children in comfort. And Hanna had always been faithful to Arnold even though they had lived apart almost thirty years. She had one or two male friends.

“Oh I am becoming too European,” Hanna laughed “deprived of sex I see as its consequence now in late middle age a hallucination of dancing girls on a verandah,” she laughs, cynically amused. “But then I suppose I have always been a little European. I have, however, held back. I have surrendered to no one in the ruling class, to oppressors. Still it should be noted, I was too independent; none asked for more than my friendship. But if a man had shown interest and I responded, with our small Indian community in England, someone would have heard and the affair would have gotten back to Arnold. No! I am not a woman who’s had only a woman’s sexual longings. I am a mind as well, a mind in one with self realization and attainment. If I had to deprive myself to become a person truly in my own right, well then fine, I had to. The discomfort that Roxanne feels, the urge that drives her does not drive me.”

“Come and dance . . . come and dance.” The dancing girls echoed relentlessly, laughing, dancing, and Hanna just as relentlessly kept watching them hearing them and analyzing.

“Now listen to me,” Hanna said, “the discomfort that Roxanne feels, the urge that drives her does not drive me. I’m a colonial and she a modern European woman struggling with her sexuality which she finds so important. I don’t.”

But then suddenly it all fell into place for Hanna. She had thought they had only one thing in common, their age. But now she realized that there was between herself and Roxanne something quite
different. In Hanna’s excitement at resolution she continued to talk to the tittering dancing girls.

“Roxanne gave her child away after it was born and mine have now grown and gone. One to Canada and one to California. I’m alone and she is alone. My children were my adornment, my investment, more important than but like my expensive jewels; they were the rare jewels in my life. Roxanne’s jewelry is for her adornment only—for captivating. These girls dancing are my children and my youth gone away.

“What’s left, menopause and osteoporosis?”

When the others return to no. 32 from no. 28, they find Hanna dancing by herself in front of her sleeping quarters, oblivious to the onlookers.
Mothers, Fathers, Guys and Dolls

Her mother woke up Ayisha at three in the morning, shaking her by the shoulders. "Wake up . . . wake up . . . but be quiet . . . listen. Wake up. Don't be frightened. It's Mother. I need to talk you . . . . What's to become of us? I don't know what to do . . . ."

The sounds of her mother's voice seeped through Ayisha's foggy jet-lagged brain. The fright and confusion in her mother's voice was contagious. She could feel it run through her whole body. The child sat up in bed, fully awake, confused and frightened. Frightened even more by these new surroundings, a hotel room in New York where she had been exactly two days.

"Listen, I don't know what to do . . . . It's your father. He's married again . . . he has taken a second wife. I found out about it when I went through some of his notes. He brought me and you children to New York only to throw us out . . . . What will we do! We have no family, only his family friends, his distant cousins . . . . I have no one to turn to, except you. Maybe I should talk to your Uncle Faroz anyway . . . even though he knew of the second marriage and didn't tell anyone in either of our families."

Ayisha's mother Mahmouda whispered in a broken voice. She and her husband had been apart for years while he was in school in Boston, then while he was setting up his law practice in New York. She had always been a bit suspicious when he came home and seemed somewhat aloof and distant. She had thought that it was the physical distance between them. Never had she imagined a second marriage in this day and age, even if it was sanctioned, a man's right, under Islamic law in Muslim countries. No one in their educated social class had two or more wives.

"Maybe we should call Nanna and Nannie?" This was the only thought that came to Ayisha's mind.

"No, what could my parents do?" Ayisha's mother shook her head vehemently, "No." Her eyes were filled with tears.

"They could give us money to go back to Pakistan. There's a phone here by my bed. If only we knew how to get their number," Ayisha peeped out hopefully.

"I can't turn to them; they will only accuse me of choosing to marry your father, and tell me that now I must stay with him . . . . Oh, what will we do?" Mahmouda sobbed quietly. "You and your brother, Haroon, must stay with your father, since you two are the oldest. In his notes, he prays to God to forgive him if he hurts us by what he has done, even if God sanctions this marriage. He says in his notes one of the reasons he didn't tell me is because he wants his three children. He will never let me go unless the three of you stay with him. I can't take you all back with me. I'll take your baby brother and leave
you two older ones with him. I'll ask Uncle Faroz to lend me the money to get back. I wish he were my family rather than a distant relative on your father's side. He won't refuse a desperate woman . . . . I think he has a good business with the Halal meat shop. Every Muslim in the neighborhood goes to him, and he also does good business with tobacco and videos. Your father lived with him while setting up his law practice . . . . I will send him back the money when I get home,” Mahmouda babbled in fear.

Even though she was nine, Ayisha felt she was going to wet her bed from fright. She was scared of living with this anonymous man who called himself "Father" and had such a strange overpowering authority in her life that she had not been aware of before. She had spent most of her growing years with women. Ayisha lived in the house of her Dadi, her father's mother, along with her own mother and countless women servants. The only men in her life were boys around her own age, one adult servant and an incompetent elderly man who also lived there and wrote strange garbled English-Urdu letters to the queen of England. The thought of losing her mother who would go so far away . . .

Ayisha started to cry. She clutched her mother, laid her head against her soft breast and begged, “No Mummy . . . please don't make me stay . . . I don't want to be without my brother and you. Haroon might be older, but he's younger than me and he can't stay with Daddy. He'll be too frightened.”

“But the baby doesn't know your father at all! He can't stay. He's terrified of your father. Your father has barely been home to Pakistan since the baby was born, and that was once briefly when the baby was two. He's only four. He doesn't remember him.” Her mother thought about what she was saying, about separating and giving up the children. The thought only added to her fright.

“Ayisha, you must be strong, like me. You know your father must love you or he would not have written those things and had us come to New York. I will read more of his notes when he is not here. I will be strong and talk to him.”

Having devised a plan of investigation Ayisha's mother felt better. She felt less pressured and harried. “I've spent enough time in here. Your father might wake up and find me gone. You go back to sleep and leave it to me. I will find out more and then maybe talk to him. Maybe I will tell him I know everything and demand that he make a choice. I will find out who this woman is.” She turned out the light.

Ayisha waited until her mother was gone and then went to the bathroom.

The week that followed was the children's first full week in New York. They, like their mother, soon formed a plan to investigate everything, since they were not allowed to leave the building by their parents. First, they rode the elevator up and down most of the day, hoping to meet other children. They met
none. Once, they met their father on the elevator and asked him why there were no children. It turned out that if there were others they would be in school. Next, they tried sitting on the brown couch in the hotel lobby, all in a row, waiting for their neighbors to come and buy a newspaper or cigarettes and cigars from the little stand in the lobby. Then they tried just standing outside by the huge glass doors watching for people on the street. When they got tired of this, they rode the elevator up and hung out from their seventh-floor window and watched the people that went by.

Soon they developed a pattern. They noticed some people did things at certain times of the day, for instance at 7:30 a.m. out came the twin girls with red hair wearing school uniforms. Throughout the day there were people walking their pets. The most dramatic of these was the 10:00 a.m. lady who walked her poodle. She wore lots of makeup which the children thought was paint, had blue hair and colorful clothes, over which she always wore a yellow scarf and shiny black jacket. But most fascinating of all was the 8:00 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. couple. The woman usually wore a sleeveless dress, fitted to the waist, with a wide gored skirt that swung around as she walked. The couple would walk arm-in-arm, kissing each other, their lips never separating. The children would watch them and discuss how they must suck the air from each other's lungs, circulate the air through each other, and must breath in and out through their noses. This was what their mother always told them to do, to close their mouths and breath through their noses. In the evenings the couple hung around, pushed up against the building, and went on exchanging air.

Occasionally the children watched television and there they saw people not wearing very much, especially the women. They also saw cartoons with funny animals and people that kept hurting and hitting each other.

Ayisha's mother kept her abreast of the discussions with her father. Mahmouda had decided she would not separate the children, if she could help it. She told Ayisha that her father had married an American woman to get American citizenship while he was in law school. He hadn't wanted to tell Mahmouda because she and the children were the ones with whom he intended to stay. He had just finished the process of a divorce from his American wife. The woman was a beautiful fashion model and Mahmouda knew that there was more than just citizenship involved, because she had read his notes. Still, she had confronted him and had decided to stay with him until the whole family returned to Pakistan.

Mahmouda was also watching people and television. She was amazed that American women had such taut bodies, and she vowed she would have one, too, but she didn't know how. She started going out shopping with only her oldest son, Haroon. She would come back and tell the other children funny
stories about how she would tell the clerk what she wanted and get something completely different, although she spoke fluent English. She would ask for lady fingers and get cake in the shape of fingers. Then she would say, “No, lady fingers are a vegetable.” The clerk would bring her green beans. She asked for *brinjal* and would be given Indian pickles. Finally she gained enough confidence to walk down the aisles and just pick out what she wanted. She soon learned that lady fingers were okra and that *brinjal* was eggplant.

As things progressed their father decided to take an interest in each child individually since the children as a group tried to stay away from him as much as possible. One by one he asked them what they liked. He asked Ayisha if she liked dolls.

“Oh, I haven’t had a new doll since the last one you got me,” she said interested.

“Then I’ll take you shopping for a new doll. We’ll go to a large department store and you can pick one out.”

The day came. She hoped they would have to go far but they only went a couple of blocks to a department store nearby. At the doll section there were hundreds of dolls. Ayisha stopped, not knowing what to do. She spent a great deal of time gaping.

Soon her father started to get impatient. “Hurry up. Don’t take all day. Pick a doll,” he demanded.

“There are so many,” she said, afraid to say she needed time to pick one.

“Just decide on one,” he said, again impatiently.

In a hurry now, she looked around quickly to see if one stuck out. Two dolls made an impression, a bride doll and a very big life-size baby doll.

“Can I have any one I choose?”

“Yes, yes, just make up your mind.”

She started to make her list in her head. The bride doll was not a plaything. It was the kind of doll you put on a shelf.

The baby doll was like a big baby sitting on the shelf with its arms out, needing to be held.

The bride doll was wearing a white wedding dress with a veil like the pictures in some of the magazines in the hotel lounge. She was a more sophisticated doll.

The baby doll was so huggable. She could bathe it and wash it, powder it and diaper it. She could sleep with it and have it be a baby of her own.

But she had to become a bride before she could do all those things with a baby doll for real.
And then the bride doll could be a memento of America, later.

He nudged the back of her neck with his hand.

"Can I have two?" Ayisha asked hesitantly.

"No, just one!"

She was too big to play with dolls, now that she was her mother's confidant. Still, her outstretched hand wavered as it reached out. Then, as she was being pushed again to make a decision, she coincidentally picked the bride doll.

She still hadn't really made up her mind, but in that moment she felt she had become someone else.
Moonlight

He sat, terrified, in his corner. The Midwest seemed so strange after New York, he thought; even after being there two months he couldn't sleep. There were things he liked, like the open spaces.

She sat smoking a cigarette with a drawing pad on her lap. Thank God, she was thinking, to be in college and to be all grown up. But she found it difficult and scary being in a new country. He had such lovely hands that she started to draw them. When she was done, she showed the drawing to him and they started talking.

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Seventeen.”

“I'm eighteen. I'm the older woman.” She said and started to lead the way.

They talked about their fears. She was from North Africa and she told him about her tribe and how they never left her. He told her about his family in New York. He was a first-generation French-Italian New Yorker. He talked of his immigrant French mother. She asked if his mother spoke with a French accent and if he liked her African-French one. Oh, he loved it. She asked him if he had a girlfriend; he said no. She told him she had recently met a twenty-five-year-old man from a neighboring college and that she had started dating him.

A friendship began. Before long they were taking long walks in the country. They made up names for each other: he was the Frog Prince and, because she was older, he called her the queen, the Queen of the Weeds. They walked in the corn fields in mid-afternoon and they made up an Oasis where they could go in the moonlight. On weekends they walked holding hands by the cranes on the Platte River, where the water is an inch deep but the river is a mile wide. Sometimes the Frog Prince rode his Appaloosa with the green paint smears to the Oasis and she her camel and they would lie on their bellies in a tent and talk, pulling shut the rose-bush flaps. Even then he knew it was not their time and he said if they stayed together until they were thirty they could get married. The Queen told him how she wanted to escape the brutality of her tribe whose presence she could feel in the woods around the Oasis, hiding, watching her, waiting for her to deny them. She told him things no one knew about herself, like being sewn shut by her family until the ritual of her initiation into wife hood. But now she wanted to escape the rites. She felt it was time to do something or at least find out what could be done to reverse them. He caressed her arm and called her his beautiful, sealed, tea-rose perfume bottle.
The Prince had a friend, a doctor, whom he asked about getting the stitches removed. Eventually it was taken care of. The Queen never told any of this to her other male friend, the twenty-five-year-old from the neighboring college, although they had been doing more than holding hands for months. And so it went on like this until the summer when they were separated for the first time since the previous fall. He went to New York and she stayed on at the college.

He went to hard rock and blues concerts and wrote her many letters, sending the ticket stubs, his ice cream and candy wrappers or small labels—anything that would fit into an envelope. Sometimes he tried to make the paper talk, calling her his baby blue, on blue paper.

She spent the summer going to summer school, not knowing how she could possibly answer such wonderful letters, and seeing her twenty-five-year-old boyfriend, who told her she smelled of lotus although she swore that she wore no scent. Once or twice, and much to her surprise, the Frog Prince called her from New York; it seemed to her so extravagant, sweet and lovely. She told him that she was lonely for him.

Summer ended and soon they were back together again, taking up their walks when it was convenient and when the weather permitted. Sometimes she went to visit him in his fraternity house. Twice she left in anger: once when he and his fraternity brothers told her they were feeding drugs to their pet mice, once when he ignored her. He started having bad dreams in which his bed would shake and when he awoke it would still be shaking. She started taking art classes in an old house that was haunted, so they compared notes on the unexplained shaking of the bed and unexplained footsteps. He found a girlfriend who was very thin and had very long blond hair, this was he said his ideal type. The Queen of the Weeds spent an evening with them in a very, very short skirt. She stuck out one of her legs and said, “Don’t I have wonderful legs? I think they are my best feature."

But when they didn’t know how to respond, she asked about the poster of Elvira Madigan on the wall. He told her the story of the movie, about a Swiss soldier who had deserted his regiment and run away with a tightrope walker. The soldier’s picture was in every newspaper and the tightrope walker and he were hunted everywhere. Finally, when hiding became really impossible and they were living on nothing, the soldier shot his tightrope walker and then himself.

That summer, since his parents were in Europe, the Frog Prince did not go back to New York. They spent the summer in the country visiting abandoned houses, sometimes with the Prince’s blond girlfriend or other friends. The Queen was looking for something with which to furnish her house. He and she both
liked the thrill of almost being caught by farmers with shotguns and of the ghosts that might get them if the farmers didn’t. Often they made up stories about who might have lived there at one time. Occasionally they sat by their Oasis and talked deeply.

At the end of the summer one of their friends was planning to drive to New York to come back in a week and a half. They decided to join him and spend a week at the Prince’s parents’ house. Each night they would fall asleep talking. During the day they visited Greenwich Village; she fantasized for a moment that she would run away from it all and live in a brownstone in New York never to return to her past life. Then one day they crossed the Bowery. The Prince told her not to leave money for one of the poor men lying in the street and she started looking forward to going home. On their last outing she didn’t want any souvenirs from the East Village.

After his parents returned from Europe, the Prince’s mother found women’s undergarments in the house. She returned them to the Prince and asked why he had made such a long long-distance call to the Midwest. His mother told him he had better pay for the call. When the Prince asked the Queen, she denied making the call. The Prince and she had their first fight. He yelled at her that it was no mistake, and that she should just admit that she had called her boyfriend, probably hiding in the coat closet while he, the Prince, had been sleeping on the couch!

He remembered the day.
She wouldn’t confess to anything.
He was so exasperated he temporarily dropped it.
She yelled back at him that she was not going to wait until he and she were thirty. She was going to get married to that twenty-five-year-old boyfriend soon.

Before she married, however, she went to see the prince and tried to seduce him, reminding him how he had said he would love her, if she’d let him, while they had been in New York.

But then, after lying full-length, pressed hard against his body, kissing him passionately, she suddenly got up and ran away, saying, “. . . So you told that blonde girlfriend of yours that I didn’t turn you on, that I was only your friend. What do you say now??”

He laughed and they made up.

They kept their friendship going. One day the Prince and his girlfriend went to visit the Queen, who lived in a faraway city with her husband. When they got there, the Prince was shocked to find his Queen
disheveled, unkempt and older. Her eyes were purplish slits, her nose was red and swollen and her face was scarred with dried tears. When she saw him, she started sobbing. He looked around the apartment; here and there furniture was turned over. The television set had a footprint in it. A dresser was badly broken in one of the rooms. The double bed had been tipped over.

When she was calmer, they talked through the afternoon about her difficult and painful life. He put the dresser together with large staples. Later in the afternoon she told him he had to leave because her husband would return soon and be jealous and dangerous if he found the Prince there. Seeing this devastation and hearing about it, knowing that it could possibly go on a long time while he stood by unable to help, the Frog Prince vowed never to experience anything similar. He vowed never to get married.

The Queen of the Weeds tried to work things out in her marriage, but eventually she left her husband. The Frog Prince, years ago having become too distracted to finish school, decided to return to the East Coast and find another college.

He patted the Queen of the Weeds on the head and gave her a copy of *The Little Prince*. He told her he was going to leave because he knew she would finally be all right. They promised to write, but he never sent her his address. When a year or so had passed and she hadn’t heard from him, she asked the blond girlfriend where he was and called him up to have a talk.

The Prince locked himself away in the bathroom to talk to the Queen. He had a new girlfriend. He liked his school and was really focusing on his career. The Queen told him she had called to tell him how she had loved both her husband and the Prince. The husband-to-be had wanted to get married and the Prince had wanted to wait until they were thirty. She wanted to leave her family and had become confused. She had not found it easy to decide between the two of them. She wished the Prince hadn’t left her when her marriage was over, telling her she would be all right. She wasn’t all right and life was really difficult. The Prince listened silently until she told him that she had indeed made that phone call that he had accused her of all that time ago.

When she heard what sounded like a big gush of air coming out of the nostrils of a very angry man she said, “Why am I telling you all this? I think you should get married and have children and a normal life. Well good-bye, I won’t bother you again.” She hung up.

The Prince did have a normal life. He became an accountant. He got married to the girl he was with at the Eastern college and moved to the West Coast. He never thought of the Queen again.

One day years later she wrote him a letter from the Midwest mentioning she had gotten his address from the old Midwestern girlfriend. She said nothing about herself except that she was like a cat
with nine lives. She was wondering if he had e-mail and thought it would be fun if, after all this time, they wrote to each other.

He didn't have e-mail.

He couldn't believe it. Suddenly, after all these years, he saw himself again, a frog in the Oasis, and his croaking scared the mallards into the lake.
On Becoming a Meat Eater

In America in the 60s, sitting in front of the television set at suppertime watching the Vietnam wounded and dead, it always felt like someone was betraying others and someone was being crucified. It was already difficult to make the change from being a vegetarian to being a meat eater. The Mai Lai massacre made the change even harder.

My parents, afraid that we would not get enough protein because of a change in diet from lentils (due to the scarcity of Indian grocery stores), insisted we learn to eat meat. Making such a cosmic change for the sake of parents and protein was difficult. I had been brought up a Christian, but nobody understood that to me eating meat was cannibalism, even if it was the bread and wine transformed by the Holy Ghost. It was obvious to me that I had absorbed many of the Hindu ideas from my culture, making me more Indian than my parents realized, even though I was first-generation Pakistani, of the first generation after the English Raj. Pakistan had barely declared itself a separate nation from India when I was born. I wouldn’t have hurt a cockroach, but this was not only because of the fact that the cockroach might have been my reincarnated great great uncle. In general I believed in the sanctity of all life, animal, mineral and vegetable. I walked carefully lest I walked on ants. Once I became aware of accidentally having swallowed a water melon seed, I gave it plenty of water, nurturing it while it grew inside me, and waited for it to grow, like the bean stalk, straight out of my mouth.

In America in the 60s, I thought I should contribute—it was a socially conscious time. I became a volunteer. I picked the local state mental health institute. I thought it would be fun to work with retarded children. I was locked in the bowels of the building with retarded and dismembered persons. It was my job to try to feed some of them. The first person I had to feed was like an adult baby—no arms no legs, grown-up eyes that watched me intently. As I fed him he spat the pulp out. There were others locked away in cells. Some of them sat around banging their heads. There were very few nurses for the ward full of “children.” I lasted a week.

A little later, Biafra tried to secede from Nigeria and I wrote a caustic student paper on “Biafra or 101 Ways to Cook a Yam.” As an art student, I made drawings about Biafra, with newspaper clippings. One clipping was in the shape of a cross and a deep flowing red line hung from it. An architect came to speak to the student assembly at the college I was attending. He saw the drawings, which were on display. He said only a schizophrenic could have made them. He had had a bout of schizophrenia and they
reminded him of that. "Yes and no, yes and no." They spoke of the pain of the starving and pregnant Biafran mother, her belly stretched hard over her bones, and of war and of ignored or simply forgotten destruction. What they were were hallucinations—the hallucinations of a schizophrenic. Look at the mother eating her young. Next day at the college he gave a talk. I was afraid that he would mention the drawings because someone told me that he said he would. He seemed so obsessed. I didn't want to be embarrassed and be called a schizophrenic in front of the whole student body, so I left before he spoke. In my mind the illness I did not have and my drawings were famous overnight, but fortunately he didn't mention my name. He had already written off my future.

In desperation I told a boyfriend all that I've written here. I hoped that he would make it better, make all the embarrassment of gaining notoriety from my drawings and the pain at eating meat go away, and all he said was, "I know what you're talking about. My mother lived through the German occupation of France and she still hears Nazi footsteps in the hallway of our house in New York. I've heard her wake screaming in the middle of the night." I didn't understand it. His story didn't make me feel better, it just seemed like another horror story to add to the rest. The Nazis, for me, were the supreme cannibals: they stripped humans clean, making soap out of body fat and stretching skin for lampshades.

An image of a tent camouflaged by Trumpet Creepers—a silent metaphor for angels, soldiers, trumpets and bugle boys runs through my mind. This stained image reminds me of my initiation into American life, an initiation launched by eating meat. It was years later when the echo took place and I signed my name as "Battle" at the grocery store. For a moment, in the fight of my life, I had forgotten my own name and it is now apparent to me that this had to do with my old war against eating meat.
Poet With A Broken Pen

Ava turned on the television. And there on the stage was a very dark intense-looking beautiful man. He had thick eyebrows, a slightly hawkish nose. He was just beginning to explain how man's greatest desire since the beginning of time has been to fly and soar like the birds. He was going to fulfill this dream and, as he said this, he lifted himself into the air, arms stretched out in front and one foot locked behind the other. The audience applauded.

Ava realized this was a magic show. The kind she would never spend her time watching. This case was an exception because of the man's exotic looks. He flew around and around. "Pretty good," she thought. "Can't see the wires holding him up, but then it's TV." He must have read her mind because his helpers brought a huge glass tank on to the stage. A glass trap for the exotic bird. He lowered himself into the glass box and stood inside it. Then he pressed his hands against all four walls, one by one, to show that there was no escape but out of the top. The helpers placed a lid on the top and shut him in. He flew to the top and pressed against the lid. Then he flew back down again.

When the lid was removed off the box he flew out and suspended himself upright in the air. Then he came, flying slowly, feet facing the ground, down to the stage. The audience applauded. "The canned applause, seem to like it" Ava thought. Actually to be kind, she reconsidered, he did have some kind of an audience, because the magician brought a woman up on to the stage for his next trick. Ava turned the TV off. And then she sat back down on the couch across from the TV in her combined kitchen, study, dining room, living room. This arrangement in the basement of her apartment complex had a huge window that was at ground level. It must have been early evening, the sun doesn't set till 9:00 in the summer. There was plenty of light. Ava sat staring out the window, smoking a cigarette.

Ava wished she could believe in this kind of magic without strings attached. There was something else, Ava wished she could make this connection between magic and myth, like the magician had done between the myth of man flying and the magic of one man actually doing it. By comparison it was very pristine very pure magic, she thought, not like the magic of her childhood, snake charmers, sword swallowers, fire eaters and contortionist.

Thinking in this same vein Ava recalled, years earlier before her friend Belle left to teach in Indiana, they had started a conversation. They were sitting on Belle's bed with its thick, rumpled, white bed cover. Belle's room like her house was full of almost blond antique furniture. Belle had been
drinking wine and reading tarot. Ava was lying across the foot of the bed reading a poem of Belle's. The poem was about a snake her father had killed in front of her when she was five. Ava asked her to explain the significance of her father killing the snake. It seemed a bit negative in the poem and Ava wanted them to create a story from this episode in Belle's life. It was a wonderful evening for bohemian conversation. The cicadas were singing outside. The cars were going by slowly. The wind was blowing through the open windows. Ava and Belle were on the second floor. Being up high near the tree tops close to hundreds of leaves, outside the window, seemed to add to the breezy charm of the evening.

“I don’t understand why it’s so important to you that your father killed the snake?” Ava said.

“Because it is.”

“No. Look, I don’t think you understand me. What’s wrong with your father killing a snake to protect you?”

“Protect me? From what? It was a garter snake. Instead of giving me a myth he began the process of killing myth in my life.” Belle said slowly sipping her wine.

“You mean,” Ava stopped to inhale. The breeze blew gently over her words and dispersed the white smoke from her cigarette in waves. “You mean, he did all that by killing a snake. If my father had not killed a snake to protect me I would have thought him crazy.” Probably this was not quite true. Her father had told Ava many times that cobras were sacred and you shouldn’t kill them. It was very good luck to see one on your property. Once he told her that there was a snake curled up under his light weight mattress and he’d slept with it all night. It hadn’t hurt him. But, “My point is that when I was five and we lived at home in the tropics. Who knows what kind of dangerous snake could come across my path. It’s a cultural difference. I would think my father crazy to not kill a snake that might hurt me.”

“It was a garter snake, and he took a hoe and cut it in half for no reason. It wasn’t dangerous.”

“But still snakes have a mythic problem, helping to expel Eve out of the garden. I think he did that to protect you.”

“In the poem he did that to protect me, but by doing that he started the process for life and him to kill all myth in my life. He protected me from something that wouldn’t have hurt me, anyway. And this is just my earliest memory.”

“You know, Belle, your father’s not powerful enough to kill myth. You should really stop reading Carl Jung, because what you’re getting from his writing doesn’t make any sense to me. It’s all that synchronicity stuff, there being a pattern to coincidence. I don’t think so! “

“What’s your earliest memory?” She asked trying to dodge.
“Just a minute . . . Let’s work on this for a moment. Well, I can see if the snake was curled up in a circle when your father killed it. The symbol of the Oroboros. A snake eating its tail. Then there might be something to the myth of that particular snake. As it is, I don’t get it.” Ava ignored her.

“Let’s go out for a drink, want to?” Belle found Ava’s lack of understanding a point of departure rather than a beginning.

“Belle, you’re totally in your own world. I need your help working this stuff out. I want for us to create a story.”

“Oh poop Ava! let’s go out for a drink.”

“Sure,” Ava said giving in, “I’ll have a Cafe Latte. If you’re buying, that is.”

For the moment the conversation was dropped. Then one day not very long after that evening, Belle called Ava from her secretarial job which she hated. She asked Ava to meet her for lunch. She had recently gotten her M.F.A. in poetry, but couldn’t find a job teaching. She had worked as a secretary for years to support herself and her three children. Ava knew she had called her to bring some kind of change to her day. At least if nothing else, to talk about poetry.

During lunch they made a list of topics to discuss. Belle’s friends and their love lives. Belle’s love life. Ava suggested they throw around some ideas for a deadline on asking a man what his intentions were. And then the last, what was your earliest childhood memory? This last appealed to Ava. Ava started where she left off the other evening.

“Anyway, you should be more positive. You should say your father gave you your own personal myth. And now it will be interesting to see it unfold and grow in your work. As your own personal myth it’ll be interesting to see how you take it from your father killing the snake to an actual story.” Belle had not explained herself satisfactorily to Ava. Ava was really confused about the snake and the power this particular story and her father had over Belle, which Belle wouldn’t admit too.

“Since you’re very serious about this particular incident in my life Ava, I will try to explain it. In that moment when my father took the hoe and hit the snake, the snake split in two. My world of play was disrupted and intruded upon. Ever since that time I’ve always let men do the same thing. I’ve repeated the same pattern. Men started by disrupting my play and then later my life. There are theories that people repeat the incident of their first memory over and over again. But since you wanted to talk about this Ava have you been thinking about your earliest memory?”

“I’ll have to think about what you just said. But since you asked I have been thinking about my earliest childhood memory, though. I can’t say that it’s earth shattering but it does have to do with magic. I suppose there’s no harm in talking about it especially with you.” Ava barely stopped for breath, and she

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knew as always she had Belle's rapt and thoughtful attention. It was breaking up the monotony of her day.

"My dad used to ride his bicycle to teach at school. And on his way home he would stop off somewhere or other and buy an unusual gift. I was about four and just started school, our equivalent to Kindergarten. He would bring something for me to play with after I was done going over my Jane and Spot books. The "something" to play with could be as unsuitable for a child as a miniature chess set.

"My mother has certain set arrangements for furniture and doesn't change them very often. At this time we were sitting in the dining room. The dining room table was in the center of the room. The room formed a large square with two large entryways. One led to my parent's bedroom, one to the drawing room. One wall had a door-sized opening on the far side. This led to a passageway which went to the kitchen. A fire was going in the fire place at the center of this wall. This was the way the room looked for the first fifteen years of my life. At fifteen we left this house that my brothers and sisters and I were born in and that country. At this particular time the dining room table was in the center, but what was unusual was that my mother had arranged a sitting area in a corner, next to the entryway into the drawing room, against the only wall without a door. She had arranged two armchairs facing each other in front of the built-in china cabinet. On the side between them she had placed a floor lamp. It was a cozy little corner all to itself. One of the chairs was covered with a beautiful Afghan that had little mirrors in each one of its squares. Sitting on the side of these two armchairs was a card table with two smaller chairs set opposite it. I had eaten on this table. My father was late. I was sitting down to read my first readers at the card table. I really wasn't very interested in my readers, but my parents believed in a regimented life, centered around school. My father saw in me another opportunity to extend his professorial career.

"He came in. From the little table I could see up his pant leg but it was hard to get more of a picture of him. He was ecstatic to see me.

"'It's too bad you've already eaten,' he said. 'But I'll join you anyway.' The card table was smaller than the main dining room table. He was so tall that when he sat at this table it seemed to shrink to child-size. I dreaded the moment he would sit down next to me and start interrogating me about my homework. But I looked forward to the moment when he would show me the present. As he ate he talked with my mother about his day. I kept my eyes on the book and pretended to read about Jane, Dick and Spot. I had memorized most of it. Rote and memorization were very important to our schooling.

"When he was done with his meal, he made me read to him. It was all fresh in my mind from looking at the books for so long and so hard. He complimented me and helped me along. Finally the
great moment arrived.

“See what I have for you Ava? You can use it with me after your lessons.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out a pen.

“Oh how nice,” I said, but thought: another educational toy. ‘It’s a pen.’

“Then he held the pen up to the light and said, ‘See, it’s a magic pen. And when you can explain to me how it works, you can have it.’

“It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. The body was transparent. There was a red stem in the center. Swimming around the stem was a little tiny aquarium of tropical fish and plants. There were bubbles rising to the top. Suspended in the liquid were three red rings.

‘Now, the point of this pen is to try to get the three red rings down the red stem. And whoever does it first wins the game.’

“We started playing, but it wasn’t as easy as it looked. It was almost impossible for me to get the rings down the stem. You had to shake the pen, turn it upside down, move it from side to side. The rings would just float up. The liquid in the pen seemed to be thick and had a body or life of its own.

“We took turns. He was having fun and managed to get two rings down. I was working very hard and couldn’t get any rings over the stem. Finally my father said, ‘It’s time to go to bed.’

‘Let me try it, one more time. I want to see if I can make it work,’ I said.

‘Alright.’

“I took the pen in my hand and gave a few uninspired shakes. But, in my mind I had made a resolve to see what made it work. And after that I would put it together again. I held the ends of the pen in both my hands and before my father could stop me I yanked my hands apart. Much to my surprise the liquid inside the pen was only a few drops. The drops fell on the table. The rings and the fish went flying all over the table and floor. They were so tiny that they were hard to see and easy to miss. In that moment I looked at my father and said, ‘I’ll put it together again.’

“He silently glared at me. I fiddled around for a moment looking for the innards of the pen. I sensed my father’s temper rising to the boiling point. So I looked him straight in the eye and said, ‘I’m tired. I think I’ll go to bed.’ I flounced up off the chair and made my exit through the living room entryway and beyond into my room.

“I kept that pen and one or two of the rings for a long time. I would fill the pen with water and try to do the magic trick again. It became parts of a magic pen, even though the magic trick was long since dead.”
“So the point of this,” Belle said, “I’ll see if I can develop a personal myth in my writing and Ava you see if you can write a story with a broken pen, which is always a challenge. In the mean time we’ve had a great lunch. I may be totally into my own world but I pulled you in and we did work on this together. It started with the poem about my earliest memory and ended with the story of your earliest memory. I knew you’d go on and on!”

“I feel cheated,” Ava pouted, “Because I wanted to make one story out of it, and for us to work together. You’re the writer Belle.

“Stop pouting. You probably like the pen more because it was broken! It gave you something to mend.”

“Oh Alright.”

“Let’s divide the bill!” Ava and Belle said in unison, laughing.
Love Story

This image—the one with the roses and the shells—is reminiscent of the last and only dinner that we had together. I had not seen him in eight months. He and I never saw each other again after that night. He picked me up at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston where I was walking circles around the Indian on horseback, waiting, nervous, anxious. In the image, time has been collapsed into layers. As far as I can tell, everything has been thrown in: The almost silent, long and lovely drive with a stop at an ocean bar; dinner by a lighthouse with a deck extending out over the ocean; the black dress with all those lovely roses; the scarf rolled and tied tight, like my emotions, around my waist, kept in by arms crossed around it; the nervousness at the pit of my stomach; the fantasy of sharks in the water; the not very good clams, but the wonderful view of the lighthouse across the white deck extending over the black water.

I sat next to him trying to make conversation, tongue-tied. We began in my mind like a clap, two hands slapped together, as we said the same words at the same time. When we went to choose a table, he and I both said, “This one!”

Why did that mean so much then?

What did I know about him? That he spent his evenings in a bar? His friends said he was a genius, that he could solve any scientific problem in his field in less time than it took his teachers to write it out. He was arrogant.

When I was trying to find him in Boston, I called his home. I talked to his mother. She told me other things about him over the phone. She said that he had been a beautiful child and that he had been very sick as a baby. “Maybe,” she said, “it did some damage being that sick. The fever attacked his brain.”

His father had stayed in Russia. His mother had remarried his uncle. His uncle had abused him dreadfully. Now his sister and his mother were worried about him. They both wanted him to give up drinking. His stepfather had threatened to and finally thrown him out of their house where he had come to live after leaving his postdoctoral work at our university. He had said that he wouldn’t drink, but in the basement, where he lived, there had been beer cans everywhere. He had wanted to move to Russia to be with his father who was so poor. In Russia it was very hard even to get a fresh chicken. People were starving and had been since the time of the revolution. It was a difficult time. His father had written his mother and told her these things. His family in the States had sent him once to visit his father in Russia, hoping that would end his desire live there, but when things deteriorated he still wanted to be with his father.
He liked Dylan Thomas and Shakespeare, loved Beethoven, and somehow they echoed his own life. In his old apartment I had once seen a biography of Beethoven, while the fifth symphony crashed around him and in him. He seemed to me to smash things around, just like Beethoven had done especially after becoming deaf.

Once, I remember, he had come to our house unannounced. My housemate and I were in the kitchen enjoying a quiet Saturday evening. I was working at the counter and she was making very stiff frozen drinks with orange juice, using a lot of crushed ice. She put the mixture away in the refrigerator after pouring out two glasses. To our surprise there was a knock on the door and two men appeared. Yes, we remembered them from the local bar two blocks away from our house and I had tried to make friends with one of them, a Greek who looked like my brother. I was very nervous. I liked them both, the one I later went to see in Boston particularly.

I was dyeing an already hideous, shocking pink sweater magenta. The sweater had a panel in front with a huge green parrot. I showed him what I was doing and he shuddered! Anyway, we sat at the kitchen table, which was covered with my books. I was reading John Fowles' *Daniel Martin* and Carl Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. I read a passage from Jung—something about emotional and mental illness being contagious diseases. This I found particularly interesting; I knew I was catching something and, since he spent so much time in the bar with people who didn't seem very stable, thought that he might also be. Then from *Daniel Martin* I read something about salmon going upstream, spawning and dying, which was a very veiled comment on his lifestyle.

I was trying to bait him. At that time in my life, I tended to be subtle, so I doubt if any of what I said ever hit its mark.

The most moving thing that happened that night is that after he asked me to sit next to him, he said he was going to tell me a story about his mother and father right after they were married.

His father had been in the army at the time and when on leave went to see his wife. One day, during his leave, he had taken his wife to his mother's grave and, kneeling before it, had said, "Forgive me, I will make it up to you."

I asked what his father had meant. He said, "I don't know, but I think since he was in the army, he probably lived a life that my mother needed to forgive him for."

I liked the story—it had left so much unsaid—and especially his very blue eyes and how they shone at that moment, how his hand had grabbed for my arm and squeezed it while he had told his story.

But then something awful happened that broke my heart. He got terribly drunk, chased my housemate up the stairs leading to our bedrooms and grabbed her. He kissed her and she had laughed
and laughed while he groped at different parts of her body, saying outrageous things.

We lived in a small university town. One always hears things through the grapevine. So, when I had not seen him anywhere after that night, I snooped around. I called one of his friends and they told me that he was in the psychiatric ward at the hospital. After he had had too much to drink at my house, that night, he had gone to the friend's house and curled up outside his basement window. He had begged to be hospitalized.

When I went to visit him in the hospital he pretended to be reading, but the book was upside down.

This is all I can remember. But after that trip to Boston he made a gesture of opening and shutting his mailbox several times. I thought that this could only mean that he wanted mail, so I got up every morning at five for about three weeks and wrote to him. I wish I had those cards with the Marc Chagall paintings on them. I would print them here. I never got a response, so I stopped. I suppose there was more, but the facts have blurred. I see now that we lived separate lives and that we never really met, except in the most superficial way. Fantasies have such tenacious hooks and claws.
Prom Night in the Midwest
The Communion Tree

Today, I can’t remember what year or month my father died. What I do remember is that the day after my father’s death was a very hot day, although it may have been a warm day in the middle of winter.

Mr. Johnson told me to meet him at a graveyard where I could buy a plot. We walked around, Sharon, a family friend, Mr. Johnson and I. The place was completely desolate and bare except for gravestones. I wandered around in disbelief, horrified at the thought that my father’s new home was to be so austere and ugly.

He was avid gardener. The family photographs, once an elegant black album, later with every move a collection in envelopes, included close-ups of beautiful flowers from orchids to begonias, flowers that had bright carnival shades of yellow, orange and red. When we were in Pakistan my father, fascinated with exotic flowers grew black roses. In Iowa he converted our basement into a hothouse filled with orchids. He would get up at five every morning and in his beet-colored robe that loosely covered his pinstriped pajamas, he would wander around attending the hothouse and indoor plants. He mothered his plants like children. Gently leaning over, or stretching his arm to reach them, he would pinch off dead and suspicious-looking leaves. He would feel the soil with his fingertips, digging them deep into the soil. He would do this intermittently between drinking his tea and talking to my mother, sharing with her his discoveries of new roots, buds and shoots. It was rare that my brothers and I would be up this early, although sometimes my brothers would come home that early. Then they would be caught, sitting on the steps, leaning asleep against the back door. When my father tried to open the door to go down to the basement, he would find them. All he said was, “Don’t tell your mother,” and sent them up to bed. Rarely would I get up that early, but even at seven my parents would still be in the kitchen talking and drinking tea. My mother would be getting a head start on the cooking for the day. My father would say to me, “Come here, look at how the rope plant is twisting and climbing” or, “Look at this tuberous begonia; it’s still flowering, even though it should be dormant by now,” “See the cactus, it’s a Christmas cactus, but it blooms all year ‘round.” I can’t say this impressed me much. Gardens were to play in, and plants were beautiful things that were always there. I had no real affinity for gardening.

In the summer my father had a half-acre garden behind the house and also in an adjoining vacant lot. I could hardly believe that a man always surrounded by living things and so nurturing of them, was going to lie in an empty place with nothing but stones surrounding him. I couldn’t conceive of burying
him in this place. Everything was being done to make things easier for me, but it appeared to me that
people had no understanding of my emotions, nor of my wishes to make my father’s death as true to his
life as possible. It was not until I asked that I found out that the graveyard was very large, covering acres
of land. Sharon and I, with Mr. Johnson in tow, started to investigate this endless desert of square stones,
while the sun beat down on us. At one end I could see trees and pastures. I headed in that direction.
Before the pasture, there was a huge elm. Far out and away from it was a scattering of gravestones. There
was nothing directly under the tree, or too nearby. I couldn’t believe my luck. It was a miracle: an
American elm in southeastern Iowa that hadn’t died of Dutch elm disease.

Theo and his grandmother sat in the shade of the tree. It was fall and unbearably hot. The leaves of the
tree formed a pattern covering them. The shadows over them were fan-shaped. Their umbrella seemed
to be moving in abstract shapes blown by the dry hot wind. On the ground the pattern continued, in
black and gray mobile shades. His grandmother sat cross-legged on the jute bed. She was looking
through some loose pages of her husband’s calligraphy. Her skin was shiny with oil. Her new daughter-
in-law had rubbed her down with it. Eventually some of it would be absorbed by her skin, then she
would take a bath. She watched Theo with pride while she flipped the pages. He was watching her and
turning pages like she did. He was still wearing his white school clothes, sitting at the base of the tree. He
hadn’t wanted to change and she was not given to arguing with him.

Theo was six years old and his grandmother’s first and only grandchild. He had been attending
school for two years. Education was very important to Clara. All but two of her eight children were
highly educated. They were all married and all but one lived away from home. She had remained with
the youngest of her two sons in the house her husband had built. In the beginning, she and her husband
had lived under this very same tree. Their first child had been born under it. It had provided shelter
from the heat and was a covering in the winter while the house was being built. This tree was their family
tent. From then on every generation was told this story of the tree that Abdul and Clara had found to
build their house around. Eventually an enclosed wall went up around the house and the tree became the
center of the courtyard.

Something in the book attracted Theo’s attention. He began to read. The page engrossed him for
a long time. When he finished reading, he ripped the page out.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m done with the page.” Theo looked up at her, surprised. “I don’t need it anymore. You can
have it for your collection. Aren’t your pages loose too?”
“Oh, you adorable, intelligent child,” she said, smiling. “So you’re done with the page! But what I’m looking at is your grandfather’s calligraphy which is in loose pages. Would you like to see it?”

Theo moved from the base of the tree to the side of her bed. He had never met his grandfather, who had died before Theo was born. Tara Khan, his father, was mostly uneducated. He was not at all like his older brothers and sisters, who were all pharmacists nurses or doctors. To make matters worse, his wife had died six years ago when Theo was only six months old. While cooking, her sari had caught fire. She had suffered severe burns and died shortly afterwards. He hadn’t remarried for the first six years of Theo’s life. Tara Khan’s mother had taken care of Theo, who was not pleased when his father recently remarried. He was too used to having the sole attention of his grandmother and his father, although his father was uncommunicative. Father came home in the evenings. When all the necessities were finished, he would sit on a stool and smoke his hooka or water pipe, oblivious to everything around him. He insisted that his son get an education and the priests in this Christian village saw to that. Theo had just started getting private lessons in English. Outside of this concern, Tara Khan left the raising of his son to the boy’s grandmother. Occasionally he would say a gruff word, but all in all it was quite an uneventful life: Theo, his grandmother and his father in their sand-colored house. Theo had the full run of the verandahs and courtyard and played by himself, although he also had school friends to play with during the day. In the evening, however, it was a quiet, set routine of family prayer, a meal and solitary play.

Then it had all changed. Tara Khan remarried. The bride was a quiet girl, and her mother-in-law, remained in control. Neither Tara Khan nor his mother helped Rose and Theo adjust to each other, and before Rose really had the chance to adapt to the situation, she was pregnant with her first child. Theo didn’t adapt. Clara who was an orphan herself and had been raised by a German missionary empathized with her grandson strongly and lavished attention on him. The major emphasis in her life had been on daily details and religion, to the exclusion of practically all else.

Now that Theo was watching her turn her pages, she saw a good opportunity to tell him the story of his grandfather’s conversion to Christianity.

“Did you know you were a Rajput prince? Yes, you are, my life. Your grandfather was a Rajput.

“One day, when your grandfather had just recently finished his studies in the city, he heard a very holy man, a missionary, give a sermon. It was all about the light of a new day, if you chose to become a believer. The light and the new day was knowing and believing in Jesus. When your grandfather heard this sermon about rebirth and about this man, he came to believe in the new day and the new light. So, your grandfather went home, packed up his things and left his Muslim family, and Jesus brought him here to this Christian village where the missionaries who had saved him gave him a new life. They gave
him land, he was already a doctor. He started a clean, new life away from all the dirty habits of worshipping golden idols, false gods, snakes and trees. So, today, because of this you have a new life. You're born again in the light of One whose name is too good to be taken by my unclean lips. See that you always follow in Jesus's footsteps and do the works He has taught you to do. Study hard and teach His gospels in the name of the priests and missionaries who saved my life and raised me, and who teach you. Where would I be if they had not taken me in? Where would you be? You wouldn't have been born. Believe only in Him who has saved your life by giving you eternal life.

“Once He was a child, born in a barn in a dirty village where there was no place for His mother in any house. Many people, kings and leaders were afraid of Him because they thought he would overthrow them and they had seen a star proclaiming His birth. You must watch the stars at night. Perhaps that one star will reappear again, and your mother and your grandfather will be brought back to life and we will all go up to heaven to a better life together.”

Looking at her husband's calligraphy, she missed him, and knew in her heart that it was only in death that she would be united with him. At the same time, she held on tenaciously to life.

“Look at your aunts and uncle. Except for your father, they're all very educated. You should be like them. It's all right to be a farmer, but you must do more. You'll have the best education money can buy. Your family will see to that.”

Theo kept listening, watching the page of calligraphy that hadn't turned since the telling of the story about the poor little boy who had no place to be born. But at least the other little boy had a mother. He liked it when his grandmother and he were alone together. Now that he had to share her attention with his stepmother and possibly the new baby, he didn't like it very much. So, when she started to get up and go to her bath, he sat down cross-legged on her jute bed with his chin on his fist, and thought. Tomorrow, after school, he was going to run away to his Aunt Elizabeth. “I'm not going to stay here. Nobody takes care of me,” he thought. He believed that what was going on in this house was not for him. Therefore, tomorrow when he was supposed to be in school, he would simply leave and go to his Aunt Elizabeth's house in a nearby town. There was no reason to live here anymore. Grandmother no longer cooked only for him. Now she spent all her time with Rose, and Rose with her. Tara Khan had never paid much attention to him except to spank him. The rest of the time it was just read, read, read. “I can do all this somewhere else. My aunts will take care of me,” he thought, as he made his plan to escape.

That night he didn't bother to pack. The next day he started out to the village school, trying to look very natural. But once he was outside the confines of the house and around the corner, he took off for his Aunt Elizabeth's house, first on foot and then by horse and buggy. Later, when he had gone far out
of the town he rode on the train. His aunt was surprised but overjoyed to see him. She had no children of her own. Theo was all his aunts' and uncles' little darling.

His happiness didn't last long. His father came to take him away, and then it was the same old routine. Part of this routine became his running away.

A year later Rose had a daughter, Elizabeth, and for a few years Theo had a playmate and stayed home. He was very happy to have a younger sister. However, when he was eleven, his little sister died. Rose was very afraid to tell him, knowing he would be crushed. His grandmother told him. Theo was silent. He didn’t cry or get upset.

The next day he left for school and once he was far enough away from the house, made his escape back to his Aunt Elizabeth’s. This time he never went back. He refused to leave. Nobody could force him to go back to that house. Then his oldest aunt intervened and took him in. She wasn’t going to give him up. Theo had finally found a home far away from the village, with his aunt who was a doctor and her wealthy Muslim husband.

Tara Khan complained that the only reason he didn’t want the boy living with his aunts was that they would spoil him, give him everything he wanted. As it turned out, this was true in every respect, to clothes, servants and education. His grandmother had been right. His aunt gave him the best education money could buy, and lots of it, at major colleges and universities.

Like him, but under different circumstances, one by one his eight half-brothers and half-sisters left the village and all, except one, went back to farm the land. All of them left to get a better education and to live in the city of Lahore. One by one, the aunts took them in, except for the younger ones, who were raised by an older sister and brothers. Theo, to his aunts, remained a very special person and they always treated him like a son.

Mine is a large extended family, scattered all over the globe, like salt on the skin of an orange. My father always wanted to give us some sense of home by gaining his American citizenship. He came to America on a student visa and afterwards decided to stay and teach. We came to stay with him in small towns in Ohio, which only lasted two years, but he found that he couldn't change his status, so we had to return to Pakistan. There he found the political situation dangerous for us to grow up in, and applied for jobs in the US again, hoping for a work permit through which it might be possible to apply for citizenship. He found a job in Iowa. After many meetings with a friend who was a congressman, and the initiating of bills in the state congress that extended his stay, he lay in his coffin a permanent resident, but not a citizen. He like his ancestors left family and home and once he’d finally decided to immigrate to
America, a country he loved, he spent most of his time struggling for citizenship, and died with a Green Card in his hand.

When I saw the American elm rising up to the height of 100 feet, its branches spread wide, drooping and swaying at the ends, its trunk like a gray, cylindrical vase, I was ready to believe that even if this wasn’t the tree of heaven, at least Theo had come full circle.