Losing the Atmosphere

A Memoir

A Baffling Disorder, a Search for Help, and the Therapist Who Understood

Vivian Conan

Afterword by
Jeffery Smith, MD

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by Vivian Conan

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To my mother,
who opened a new chapter in our lives
when she said, “It’s love at second sight.”

And to Emily,
who kept the kernel of me safe for all those years.

Life, too, is like that. You live it forward,
but understand it backward.

—Abraham Verghese, *Cutting for Stone*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THESE EVENTS ARE TRUE to the best of my memory and the memories of my mother and aunts, who were generous in sharing them with me. There are no composite characters or altered details, but some names have been changed: all boyfriends; all doctors and staff at Mount Sinai Hospital; all patients during my first Mount Sinai stay; all patients at Albert Einstein Hospital; my Bronx apartment mate, Karen; and Catskills hotel owner Mrs. Comitor. I have also changed the names of some of my therapists—Dr. Sacker, Gerald, Marybeth, and Dr. Blum—and the names of Dr. Smith's children. Excerpts from letters and hospital records are verbatim. Dialogue has been created by me to bring scenes to life.

CONTENTS

Prologue—1

PART ONE: BEGINNINGS

1. Two Mommies—5
2. Two Daddies—13
3. The Gentle Slap of Cards—21
4. Cookie—31
5. A Little Closer to Nebraska—39
6. Sweet Sixteen—53

PART TWO: ANALYSIS

7. Appointments—61
8. The Rush of the River—75
9. Beethoven's Fifth—85
10. Lost Child—95
11. Sailboat—105
12. Ultimatum—111
13. Nine Credits—121

PART THREE: MOUNT SINAI

14. T.U.B.E.—133
15. Dry Mouth—143
16. The Flute Plays the Violin—151
17. Susan Has a Secret—163
18. Sleep—171
19. No Refuge—179

Photo Album: 1942–1965—197

PART FOUR: EINSTEIN

20. Rose Garden—209
21. Psychodrama—217
22. Picasso—227
23. Vagabond—241

PART FIVE: LATE BLOOMER

24. Overing Underground—257
25. Rum Raisin—265
26. Rebecca—271
27. Horizontal—277
28. The Right Choice—285

PART SIX: ALTERS

29. Adulthood—293
30. Flight Lessons—299
31. Mommybeth—307
32. An Explanation—313
33. Meeting Myselves—321
34. Believing, Doubting—329
35. Being Seen—339
36. The Left Back Burner—347

Photo Album: 1966–1997—357

PART SEVEN: HEALING

37. The Saddest Present—365
38. Object Permanence—377
39. Windchill—387
40. The Same Dog—397
41. My Mother's Keeper—409
42. Water Doesn't Flow Uphill—421

Epilogue—429

Photo Album: 1998–Present—433

AFTERWORD *Jeffery Smith, MD*—441

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS—453

ABOUT THE AUTHOR—455

Prologue

MY OWN SCREAM WOKE ME, but I couldn't open my eyes. My flesh was without form, liquid drained into the mattress.

My brain said not to worry, this sucked-out Hades feeling was just the morning routine; in an hour I would be reconstituted, able to get up and go to work. There was no way to hurry the process. I started to shake, as if I were having a seizure. The trembling stopped and a keening howl filled the room.

Footsteps. My neighbor passing my apartment door. Had he heard? I would feel awkward if I ran into him that evening in the lobby.

The task: to get my body back.

I concentrated on my right index finger, willing my substance to exude from the mattress and fill it. The shakes returned. Stopped. I could move my finger. It usually happened this way, slowly at first. A few fingers I had to focus on individually until, with a rush, everything filled at once. FingersHandsArms. Torso. ToesFeetLegs. The shaking became continuous, like chattering teeth, except it was the whole length of me. My eyes opened. Daylight at the edges of the window shades. I kept my gaze anchored to the long-necked Modigliani lady in her frame on the far wall until the shudders played themselves out and the howling turned to whimpering. I got out of bed and walked to the bathroom.

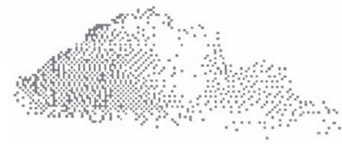
In the kitchen, I put up water for tea and turned on the news. It was still 1982. Another bombing in Beirut. Bridges destroyed. But

I was prepared. Weeks back, when I'd first heard of the bombings, I signed up for flying lessons at a small airport in New Jersey so I would have a way to escape. No matter that the fighting was thousands of miles from my home in Manhattan, or that I didn't own a plane. With eight hours on my flight log, I felt capable of getting into any Cessna 150 parked on a rooftop and soaring over damaged bridges to safety.

My colleagues at work thought it was cool that I was learning to fly. "You're so brave," they said. I smiled. It had nothing to do with bravery.

I KNEW THAT, FROM THE OUTSIDE, my life seemed unremarkable. Anyone who stood behind me on a supermarket line or sat next to me on a bus would probably have forgotten me seconds after we went our separate ways. Yet for decades I had been dealing with a tangle of symptoms I didn't understand. In high school and college, I scoured books about abnormal psychology, looking for any label, however scary, that would take away my feeling that I was an alien species of one. None fit. Even in the abnormal world I was a freak.

It would take many years, several wrong turns by professionals, and several suicide attempts and hospitalizations before I learned what was really going on. Then came the hardest task of all: healing. This is my story. ▪



PART ONE

BEGINNINGS

CHAPTER 1

Two Mommies

NONA FED US LUNCH the same way every day. White kerchief tied over the coiled gray braid at the nape of her neck, small gold earrings bouncing gently, and lips sucked in over toothless gums, she carried a delicious-smelling pot from the stove to the table. She dipped in a spoon and loaded it with a flavorful mush of potatoes, meat, tomatoes, and string beans. Holding her hand under it to catch any spills, she brought it toward my face. I opened my mouth and she slipped it in. While I chewed, she refilled the spoon and ferried it to my cousin Jerry's mouth. Next was my cousin George's. If food dripped down our chins, Nona scraped it upward with the spoon and guided it into our mouths.

All the while, she told us stories. "De farmer, he work hard to plant ta vegetables," she would begin. "He put water and take out alla ta weeds."

My turn for the spoon.

"He no see de horse what come in de night to eat ta vegetables."

Jerry's turn.

"An' he tink to himself, Why alla ta vegetables dey disappear lak dat? What's happen?"

George's turn.

"An' he say, I gawn fine out who take ta vegetables."

The farmer hid in the field with his gun. There was a loud BAMM! Nona always timed it perfectly. Just as the horse was running away, spinach dangling from his mouth, the pot would be empty.

After we got up to play, Nona walked to the sink, swaying from side to side on her bowed legs, and washed the pot and spoon. She stopped at the stove to lift the lids from the supper pots and give a quick stir. Then she took my baby brother, Marvin, out of his playpen. Carrying him in her arms, she went back down to the basement to sew.

I loved staying in my grandparents' house, where we had been living for the past three months, since my father left for the war. During the day, my mother and aunts were at work, and Papoo peddled aprons and pillowcases to housewives in Brighton Beach. Nona, the lone adult at home, sewed aprons and took care of the children. Sometimes we played in the backyard, sometimes in the basement, where we crawled in and out of the empty cartons next to Nona's sewing machine and Marvin's playpen, or climbed up the mountain of fabric scraps and slid down.

Though not yet three, I sensed that the rules were looser here in Brooklyn. When my parents and I had lived in Knickerbocker Village on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, I hadn't been allowed to put anything into my mouth if someone else's mouth had touched it. Germs. There had been no stories at the table. Most of the mealtime talk had been Spanish practice—if I wanted bread and butter, I had to say, "*Quiero pan y mantequilla, por favor*"—or my father reading aloud to my mother from the newspaper. And punishment at Nona's wasn't really punishment. Once, when Jerry and I did something we weren't supposed to, Aunt Mollie said, "You naughty children!" but she was smiling.

I would find out years later that my mother also felt freer away from my father's control. When she had brought me home from the hospital as a newborn, he'd forbidden her to use baby talk with me. No coo-cooing. She was permitted to speak English, but he spoke to me only in Spanish. To him, I was a grownup in miniature, one step away from the harsh realities of the job world, and it would be useful if I knew another language.

My father had also appointed himself the guardian of my health. Every evening, he demanded a report from my mother. *Where did you go with her today? It was chilly out; did you put a sweater on her? It was hot; did she sweat? How much milk did she drink?* When I caught my first cold at nine months, he berated her. She hadn't dressed me properly, he said, hadn't opened the window wide enough when she put me to sleep. My mother said she began to feel like hired help.

MY PARENTS MET IN MARCH, 1941, at a foreign-language conversation club in Manhattan. Both were first-generation Americans whose parents—hers, Jews from Greece and Turkey; his, Jews from Russia—had come to America through Ellis Island early in the century. Bea, my mother, whose husband of three years had divorced her, was 26. A graduate of Brooklyn College, where she had majored in French, she came to the club because someone told her it was a good place to meet men. My father, Jack, 32 and also divorced—he'd gone to Reno to end a four-year marriage—was a regular who spoke several languages. He was self-taught, having dropped out of high school to support his younger brother and two sisters when both his parents died of cancer.

Sometimes I imagine their meeting. Jack saw a pretty, soft-spoken woman with long brown hair combed into a stylish upsweep. Bea saw a serious, handsome man with dark curly hair and a mustache over full lips. Chatting in French, they told each other where they worked: she, sewing in a garment factory, the only job she could get in the lingering Depression; he, at the post office, where he used his linguistic proficiency inspecting customs declarations.

Their three-month courtship included many strolls along the Coney Island boardwalk. Bea was captivated because Jack liked classical music, studied languages, and played chess, but mostly because he showed an interest in her. She told me her self-esteem had been badly damaged by her divorce, and also that she wanted to be married again to please her mother. The fifth of nine children—eight of whom lived to adulthood—she knew, as did all seven girls, that Mama wished the best for them. The best was a husband. When Jack proposed one May evening on a long walk from Coney Island back to her family's home on 74th Street in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, she accepted. They were married by a Justice of the Peace on July 4, 1941. I was born ten months later, on May 7, 1942.

A MONTH OR SO AFTER MY BIRTH, my mother told me, she arrived home from grocery shopping to find my father giving me a bath in the kitchen sink. To her horror, after he lifted me out of the basin of warm water, he filled it with cold and plunged me in. "Warm water opens her pores," he explained over my shrieks. "If you don't close them right away, she'll get sick." After that, my mother bathed me herself, when my father wasn't home.

Another day, sometime during my first six months, my mother's younger sister Sophia came to visit. According to the routine my father had established, my mother put me into my crib after my evening feeding and closed the bedroom door. She and Sophia were about to leave for the movies when I let out a piercing howl. My mother started toward the bedroom. My father blocked her way.

"If you go in," he said, "she'll learn that all she has to do to get her way is cry."

"You know I don't usually go in," my mother said as my wails continued, "but this isn't her normal cry."

"Don't interfere! *Go to the movies with your sister!*"

They returned several hours later to find my father playing chess against himself in a silent apartment. The incident was never discussed.

When I was two and a half, my father began to worry about being drafted. Until then, he had been exempt from military service because of an enlarged heart. Now, with the war raging in Europe and the Pacific, the Selective Service was calling up men who had previously been deferred. Rather than wait for their letter, which would almost certainly have meant being sent into combat, he used his typing, stenography, and language skills to secure a civilian position in the Army. He was to ship out at the end of October, but when he said his wife was expecting a baby soon, Army officials allowed him to wait a few weeks.

My brother, Marvin, was born on November 10, 1944. A week later, my father sailed for Italy, and my mother, Marvin, and I moved into Nona and Papoo's house. Its four apartments were already occupied, some by family, some by other tenants, so we added ourselves to Nona and Papoo's apartment. With our arrival, its three bedrooms were crammed with ten people, including Aunt Mollie, whose husband was also in the war; her one-year-old son, my cousin Jerry; and my unmarried aunts, Rae, Sophia, and Diana.

In the beginning of my parents' marriage, my mother had deposited her factory salary into their joint checking account, but after she made a small purchase without asking my father beforehand, he'd taken her name off the account. Now, with Nona caring for Marvin and me, my mother found a job as a substitute teacher

at P.S. 128, a ten-minute walk away, and opened her own bank account. She also passed the Board of Ed test to become a permanent teacher and, in February, three months after our move to Brooklyn, was offered a fifth-grade class at P.S. 54 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, much farther away. She accepted, even though it meant she would get home more than an hour later.

At about the same time, Aunt Sarah and Uncle Sam, who also lived in the 74th Street house, told my mother about a vacant apartment around the corner, above a dry goods store on 20th Avenue. Though hesitant to move out on her own with two children, my mother liked the idea of having privacy and went to look at it. The small living room and bedroom faced the back. It was winter—no leaves on the trees—and she could see the fences and clotheslines in all the backyards of the houses on 74th Street, right down to Nona's. She decided to take it.

I was miserable at my sudden banishment—from Nona, my aunts, my cousins. On 74th Street, if one grownup was busy, another was glad to pay attention to me. Here, there was just my mother, who was always busy. "I'll look at it later," she said if I tried to show her a drawing.

Every morning while she dressed Marvin, I dressed myself. Then I asked her to tie my shoelaces. "I'll be happy when you learn to tie them yourself," she would say in an annoyed voice. "Hold still!" After we dropped Marvin off at Nona's, she and I walked to the JCH—Jewish Community House—on Bay Parkway, where she had enrolled me in nursery school.

My mother was rushed when she picked me up in the afternoon, too. "That's lovely," she would say, tucking my painting into her bag. "Now get your hat." We walked the quarter mile to Nona's. Still in our coats, we hurried through the upstairs hall and down the side steps to the basement, where my mother lifted Marvin out of his playpen.

Back home, she peeled potatoes and cooked lamb chops and canned peas, washed the dishes, wrote lesson plans, cleaned the bathroom, and darned socks. She hardly smiled anymore. Marvin was too young to play with, so I amused myself, either indoors or on the sidewalk in front of the dry goods store owned by our landlady, Mrs. Feigenbaum. Sometimes I asked permission to walk around the corner to Nona's. My mother usually said yes and might add, "Tell Nona I'll be over in a half hour to use the washing machine."

I was invariably cheerful at Nona's, where I got lots of love and attention, but with my mother I began to whine.

"Mah-*meee,* I can't find my *sweeea*ter," I complained one morning.

She stormed into the bedroom in her suit and her new short haircut that I was still getting used to—"I have no time for long hair," she said soon after we moved—and pulled out all the dresser drawers. "*Here!*" She flung the sweater onto my cot. Feeling like a worm you poke with a stick, I put it on quickly so we could leave.

Spring came, and the two trees in Mrs. Feigenbaum's backyard burst into flowers that pushed against our windows like pink ruffles. "They're cherry trees," my mother said, smiling. She opened a window, glanced down to make sure Mrs. Feigenbaum wasn't in the backyard, and leaned out over the clothesline to cut some branches.

"Aren't they beautiful?" she asked.

I wasn't sure she was talking to me, but I said yes just in case.

In May, days before my third birthday, a package arrived for me from Europe. My mother and I opened it to find the smallest record I had ever seen.

"Hello, Viv. This is Daddy, talking to you from across the ocean in Italy." The voice on the Victrola was scratchy, but unmistakably my father's. "Do you remember how I used to lift you high in the air and say, '*Uno, dos, tres, arreeeeeba*'? And do you remember how you didn't want to go to sleep when I put you back down in your crib, and you used to say, '*No quiero dormir*'?" I did remember.

Soon afterward, on a day my mother was particularly annoyed at me, I said, "Why don't you pack me in a carton and mail me to Daddy?"

My mother smiled, then said, in her teacher voice, "That wouldn't work, because when they sealed the carton, there wouldn't be enough air for you to breathe. You can never send living things through the mail." It made sense.

"MAH-*MEEE*, MY *LEGS* HURT," I whined as I trudged alongside her one day, holding the handlebar of Marvin's stroller while we walked for what seemed like miles. To the dry cleaners on 75th Street. The grocery store on 73rd Street. The shoe store on Bay Parkway. "When are we going *home*?"

She stopped suddenly and slapped my face. "Get out of my *sight*, you fucking bastard! Go *shit* in your *hat*! Your name is *mud*!"

When she screamed like that at home, I went to my room to color until she was in a good mood again. How could I get out of her sight here, when I had to hold onto the stroller?

We kept walking, in silence now, looking straight ahead, so I couldn't see her face. But our hands were holding the same handlebar. I felt her loathing seep through it and into me, circulating in my veins. For a minute, I felt like the worm you poke with a stick again. Then a picture came into my head of a silly man taking off his homburg, placing it upside down on the sidewalk like a pot, and squatting over it to have a bowel movement. I laughed out loud. A moment later, I stopped laughing and began sucking the thumb on my free hand.

After that day, the picture of the squatting, shitting man came to me whenever my mother screamed, "Go *shit* in your *hat*!" I always laughed, even when she slapped me.

It was as if I had two mommies: a love mommy and a hate mommy. The one who loved me hung my paintings on the wall. She let me lean against her when she read my Little Golden Books on her bed in the living room and gave me orange slices to suck when I was sick and threw up, to take away the bad taste. When the mommy who loved me was there, I didn't know about the mommy who hated me, and when the mommy who hated me was there, I didn't know about the mommy who loved me.

FINDING IT INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT to balance work and motherhood, my mother applied for maternity leave when the school year ended in June. The Board of Ed denied her request. Leave was for new mothers only, they said. Marvin was eight months old. Seeing no other option, she quit, even though the principal wanted her to stay and leaving meant she would lose her permanent license. Her plan was to look for a substitute job closer to home in September.

With the summer off, my mother was more relaxed and didn't scream as much. Almost every day, she tucked a pail and shovel, a towel, and my bathing suit into the stroller alongside Marvin for the three-block walk to Seth Low Park. Often my cousin George came, too. My mother would read on a bench while we played in the sandbox or cooled off under the sprinkler in the wading pool. Sometimes I could even get her to push me on the swings.

She did find a substitute job in September, teaching English at Seth Low Junior High, and I went back to nursery school.

Then, in November, exactly a year after he had gone, my father wrote to say he was coming home from the war. His ship would be sailing into Newport News, Virginia, and from there he would find a train or bus to New York.

We were all at Nona's one afternoon when an upstairs tenant came rushing in and said, "I just saw your husband walking on Twentieth Avenue!"

"Go! Quick!" Nona urged my mother. "So you be there before him to say hello." ▪

CHAPTER 2

Two Daddies

MY FATHER WAS TEACHING ME to tie my shoes. He placed them on the kitchen table, on top of old newspapers, then sat down beside me. We each took a shoe, and I copied him. First we made a loop with one end of the lace and held it in place with a thumb while we wrapped the other end around and pulled it through to make a second loop. Then we pulled on both loops to make it tight. "*Bueno*," my father said.

Another day, the lesson was how to say "Open it" and "Close it" in Spanish. My father unscrewed the lid of an empty jar and held one part in each hand, arms spread wide. "*Abrelo*," he said. He screwed the lid back on. "*Cierralo*," he said. After several repetitions, he handed me the jar. I opened it and closed it over and over, saying "*Abrelo*" and "*Cierralo*." My father's eyes never left me, and there was a little smile under his mustache.

But I soon came to fear him. My mother had few rules. As long as I kept out of her way, I could do what I pleased. My father had many rules. No coloring books. They stifled creativity. I was allowed to draw only on plain typing paper. Don't leave anything in the middle of the floor, where a blind person could trip on it. Don't put your glass down too close to the edge of the table. By the time Marvin was able to talk, he, too, was expected to obey. If we did everything right, my father would be in a good mood. But over the course of a day, we inevitably broke rules. That always meant yelling, sometimes hitting, or worse, tight squeezes on the back of the neck. My father used to be a boxer. His hands were strong.

He would hit if he *thought* we had broken a rule. Like the one about feet.

At night, even in winter, my father opened the window in the room Marvin and I shared, because, he said, fresh air was good for you. "Keep your feet under the covers," he ordered after we were in our beds against opposite walls. We were permitted to talk for ten minutes. Then he came to the door and said, "Face the wall." That meant no more talking. I turned, curled up to keep warm, and traced the paint bumps on the wall until I fell asleep.

My father had to get up early for his post office job, and it was still dark when his alarm rang in the living room, where he and my mother slept. On the way to his closet, which was in our room, he slid his hand under each of our blankets to feel our feet. They were usually icy. "I told you to keep them under the covers," he would say in his angry voice, then hit us through the blankets. I'd try to explain that I *had* kept my feet covered, but he would say I was lying, so by the time I was in kindergarten, I stopped explaining.

There were rules for my mother, too. For one, she wasn't allowed to turn on the radiators. If it was very cold and my father wasn't home, she would sometimes turn one on anyway, making sure to turn it off at least an hour before he got back. The only times that didn't work were when my father came home earlier than expected. Then there would be a lot of yelling about how hot it was while he opened all the windows and stripped down to his underwear. The yelling eventually gave way to muttering, which could last an hour, and we all knew to keep out of his way.

But even with the radiator knobs completely closed, a tiny bit of heat came out.

One Saturday, when my mother was at City College—she had started taking courses for her master's in education soon after my father returned from the war—he sat with his toolbox on the floor beside the living-room radiator. After a long time, he was finally able to pull it away from the wall. All that was left in its place was a pipe sticking out of the floor. He dragged the radiator into the hall and wriggled it to the top of the staircase.

"Keep back," my father said as he started to carry the radiator down. "Stay at least four steps behind me." Marvin was only three years old, so I counted, to make sure we were doing it right.

Outside, my father dragged the radiator across the sidewalk to the curb. I saw our landlady, Mrs. Feigenbaum, peek from behind the

curtain of her dry goods store. A second later, she was in the street.

"Vat do you tink you're do-ink?" she said. The apron she always wore was tied over her housedress, and her short brown hair was in tight curls, the way hair looks when you get a beauty-parlor permanent.

"I'm throwing out the radiator," my father said, the same way he might have said, "I'm throwing out some old newspapers."

"You're nut allowed to do thet!" Mrs. Feigenbaum said, stepping forward.

Marvin and I moved closer to my father.

"Oh, yeah?" It was my father's angry voice. "Who says?"

A man walking down 20th Avenue with a grocery bag stopped to watch.

"*I* say!" Mrs. Feigenbaum shouted.

"Who are *you*?" my father shouted back.

Two ladies with bakery boxes were passing. They paused.

"I'm the *lend*lord!"

"What has *that* got to do with it?" The veins popped out on the sides of my father's forehead.

I wished Mrs. Feigenbaum would stop. You weren't supposed to yell back at my father. If you were a grownup, you were allowed to answer him in a low voice. If you were a child, you weren't allowed to say anything. She should have let him throw away the radiator so we could go upstairs.

"Thet's my property!" Mrs. Feigenbaum screamed.

"I don't care *whose* property it is!" My father's face was red. "I don't want it in the house!"

More people gathered, forming a circle around the four of us. Marvin and I kept close to my father's legs. Whenever he moved, we moved with him.

"You hef no right to throw it out!"

"I have a right to do whatever I want!"

"Take thet rediator beck upstairs!"

"DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!"

"CALL THE POLICE!"

"I'll call, lady," a man said. He went into the candy store near the corner, where they had a pay phone. Another man told Mrs. Feigenbaum to calm down, the police would be here soon.

All at once, my father smiled at Marvin and me and started to shadowbox. He showed us uppercuts and how to block with one

hand while we pretend-punched with the other. I felt funny playing with people watching, but my father was having a good time, so I started having a good time, too.

Two policemen came, and my father stopped boxing. His smile went away, but he didn't shout. "Look," he said to them, "I don't want the radiator in the apartment." The people moved back into a circle, and Marvin and I kept close to my father again. Mrs. Feigenbaum didn't shout. She just said, "Thet's my property." There was a lot of talking. Finally, Mrs. Feigenbaum agreed that my father didn't have to take the radiator back. She would keep it in her store for as long as we lived there. The policemen carried it in for her.

Marvin and I went upstairs with my father. "Get ready to go to the park," he said as he put his toolbox away.

Some things my father did were fun. He read to us from *A Child's Geography of the World* and showed us how to make a magnet out of a screwdriver by wrapping one end of a wire around it and plugging the other end into a wall outlet.

Tennis was not fun.

Saturday mornings, when the concrete baseball field in Seth Low Park was empty, my father would position me on the field and show me how to hold my special child's racket. "If you stand *this* way, the ball will go *there*." Gripping my shoulder with his left hand, he swung my arm with his right. "See? But if you stand *this* way"—he tightened his grip and pivoted me—"the ball will go there." After several repetitions, he pitched a ball to me. If I swung correctly, he said, "Atta girl!" and pitched again. If I made a mistake, he repeated the gripping and pivoting. The supposedly light racket felt heavier and heavier, but I wasn't allowed to stop until my father said it was Marvin's turn.

Sunday mornings were better. My mother was home and, even though she didn't actively do things with us, the apartment seemed like a gentler place. While she studied, my father brought a chair over to the stove so we could take turns standing on it to stir the orangey-yellow mixture of lox and eggs. "Easy, now," he would say. "Just move the fork across the bottom of the pan. You don't want it to go over the sides." When it turned from soupy to tight, he would say, "OK, Viv. You can tell Mommy the feast is ready."

I was careful not to talk with my mouth full, but sometimes Marvin forgot. Whenever he did, my father got the angry forehead

crease and yelled, "How many times do I have to tell you not to talk with food in your mouth!" It was a good meal when no one got hit.

I now had two daddies as well as two mommies: a love daddy and a jail daddy. The love daddy was happy with me when I was learning and obeying. When the love daddy was there, I felt special inside, much more than I did with my mother. But when the jail daddy was there, it was my mother I went to for solace. Even though she couldn't do anything to stop him, she understood how I felt, and that helped.

Once, when I was in kindergarten, my mother went with me to a classmate's house for his birthday party. The cake was sliced, and I went to where she was sitting with the other mothers to ask whether I could have a piece.

"You know Daddy doesn't allow cake," she said.

I'd been hoping that since he wasn't there, she would say yes, the way she sometimes broke the radiator rule. "Doesn't Daddy want me to ever have any fun?" I asked, retreating to her lap so I wouldn't have to sit with the children in my shame.

"He just wants what's best for you," my mother said, but I could tell from her tone she was sorry and wished I could have cake, too.

Watching the other children eat, I wondered how it happened that I came to have my particular father and they had theirs—as if there were a pool of fathers and you were assigned one when you were born. I concluded I was less deserving, somehow deformed inside, where it didn't show. With sadness, and with a pain in my chest that felt like a hole, I accepted this.

IN SCHOOL, I TRIED TO TELL MY TEACHER, Mrs. McCullough, about the hole. It came at the same time every day, when our chairs were arranged in front of her piano for singing and she looked around at all of us with her kind face. A longing woke in me then that made my insides hurt. Every morning, I walked up to her piano stool and whispered in her ear, "I have a stomachache." Hands on the keyboard, she would lean toward me and say gently, "Sit down and try not to think about it, and it'll go away." The stab of disappointment always took me by surprise. She didn't see the hole. As I walked back to my seat, my insides hurt so much I thought they would break. Then, just as Mrs. McCullough said, the ache would go away and I would start singing with the rest of the children.

Outside of school, I daydreamed that I had a sore throat. It was so bad that when Dr. Dalven came to the house to examine me, he sent me to the hospital. I had my own special room because I was the sickest little girl there. Not even my mother and father were allowed to visit. Doctors conferred in whispers at the foot of my bed. Nurses in white caps smiled as they leaned over to smooth the fold of my top sheet and slip a thermometer into my mouth. I lay still and looked up at them—only my eyes moved—and they understood that I couldn't talk because it hurt too much.

Day by day the story grew, until it came to feel like an actual, secret part of my life. One of the nurses brought me a doll with white lace around the collar of its pink flannel pajamas. She lifted the sheet to slide it in next to my burning-fever face and stroked my cheek. The hospital world vanished when I was playing in the street with other children, but when I was alone, it started up from where it had left off—the nurse who had lifted my head from the pillow now held a glass of water to my lips.

Soon, in my secret world, I was sometimes another little girl, not in the hospital but walking around doing regular things, like going to school. No one could tell I had a big hurting hole inside me except a different set of doctors and nurses. These weren't in bodies. They were loose molecules floating in the air, all mixed together. I knew about molecules. If you cut something in half, then in half again, and kept doing it, you would eventually get the smallest piece of whatever it was. The molecule doctors and nurses saw everything that happened to me and knew everything I thought and felt. They couldn't make the hole go away, but I didn't need them to. It was enough that I wasn't invisible to them.

I wasn't invisible to the YellowSweaterLady, either. I met her the day my mother brought me to City College to lend me to a classmate who needed practice giving IQ tests to children. It was winter, and I was wearing a yellow sweater and green leggings.

"That's a pretty sweater," the lady said. "Is yellow your favorite color?"

"Green is." I didn't mind that she had gotten it wrong. No one had ever asked what I preferred before.

I arranged colored blocks into designs. "Good!" the lady said. Then she asked whether I was cold and whether I wanted her to shut the window. This was new, too. My father acted as if being cold was my fault.

That afternoon, while my mother read her book on the subway ride home, I looked at my reflection in the train window: a little girl with dark brown hair parted on the side, held in place with a barrette. I didn't turn away, because I felt the YellowSweaterLady looking down on me from above, her molecules mixed in with those of the doctors and nurses, and I wanted to keep seeing what she was seeing.

MOST OF THE TIME, the doctors and nurses and the Yellow-SweaterLady stayed in the background. But whenever I really needed them, they were right there.

One day when I was six, I was walking on 20th Avenue with my father and tripped on a sidewalk crack.

"Fuck!" I said.

"Where did you learn that word?" My father had the angry crease in his forehead, but his voice was regular.

"Mommy says it."

"Mommy never uses that word. Where did you hear it?" Now his voice was angry.

"From Mommy."

We reached Mrs. Feigenbaum's store, and my father opened the door to the hall. His voice got nicer as we walked up the stairs. "I just want to know where you heard that word. If you tell the truth, I won't hit you." He unlocked our door, and we went in. "I'll give you one more chance."

"I told you. Mommy says it."

My father grabbed my arm and lifted his other hand high in the air. It came down hard on my tush. He did it again on my back, and again on my side, and-again-and-again-and-again. The whole time, while I cried, he kept saying, "I'm hitting because you lied, not because you said that word." When he finished, he said, "What are you crying for?" as if he were angry about the crying, too. You were supposed to answer when my father asked a question. I tried to, but I couldn't talk, so I went into my room.

For a long time, I couldn't stop crying. Not because it hurt. That was before. Now I cried because it wasn't fair. I took out my crayons and paper. I made a red tulip with green leaves, a brown tree with red cherries sprinkled all through, a yellow sun, and a blue sky. I went inside the picture and stopped crying.

A while later, I heard the hall door open. My mother was home! Now she was talking to my father in the kitchen. I snuck into the foyer to listen.

"Bea, do you ever say 'fuck'?"

"Yes."

"You do?" He sounded surprised.

"Yes. Why?"

"Vivian said it today. She told me she heard it from you. I didn't believe her."

"Well, I'm sorry to say it's true."

I was glad my mother said that. Now my father would apologize. I went back to my room to wait for him.

I waited a long time—five drawings. He didn't come.

A few hours later, the four of us were sitting at the kitchen table, eating meatloaf. My father was the only one talking, reading out loud from the newspaper about Joe Louis and boxing. My stomach was tight and I couldn't chew, even though the rule was that you had to finish everything on your plate.

Then, all at once, I was in the hospital at the same time that I was sitting at the table. The doctors and nurses knew how much my stomach hurt and how hard it was for me to eat. They watched me pick up my fork and bring a piece of meatloaf to my mouth and agreed that I needed extra medicine today. ▪

CHAPTER 3

The Gentle Slap of Cards

"HERE JACK," MY MOTHER SAID when the sewing machine stopped. "See if the pocket is where you want it."

"Yup," came my father's voice. I pictured him trying on his shirt. "Good work. Can you put another one here?"

Pockets made his trip seem real. He always asked my mother to add extras to his shirts the night before he left. Lying in bed after face-the-wall time, I was happy knowing we would be without him for eight days.

In summer, the four of us usually went for a week to Villa García in upstate New York, but during the school term, my father traveled alone to places where he could practice speaking a foreign language. That year, when I was eight, it was Cuba.

Early the next morning, he filled his new pockets with money, passport, and the little pieces of paper he always carried with him for studying: vocabulary words in different languages, math formulas, chess moves. He kissed us all goodbye and walked down the stairs with his suitcase.

Drinking the eggnog that was breakfast—my mother put a raw egg and some sugar in a glass of milk, added a splash of vanilla, and stirred it with a fork—I didn't feel much different than on days my father left to go to work. His body was gone, but his aura hung in

the air. After school, I changed into pants and told Mrs. Norris, the woman who walked Marvin home from school and cleaned our apartment, that I was going down to play with my friend Maxine. Her parents owned the candy store on the corner.

I always felt free when I played in the street—games like potsy and A-my-name-is—but I was aware of that feeling only when I was going back upstairs, about to lose it. Once I entered our apartment, the memory of my liberty vanished and I became a guard soldier, monitoring every building creak. The door? My father coming home? When he arrived, I tracked minute changes in his voice, listening for any sign that an explosion was imminent. Hours of calm might pass indoors, but I never relaxed.

When I left Maxine that day, I felt my usual hallway dread. But by suppertime, my stomach didn't feel bunched up, and Marvin and I told riddles while we ate. At bedtime, my mother left the window closed. She let us talk a bit, then came to the door and said, "Face the wall." It sounded funny, as if she were rehearsing for a play. "OK," we called, then continued our game of 20 Questions. When it was over, I moved around in my bed as if I owned it. I lay on my back, then on my left side facing Marvin, then with my head down where my feet should be.

The second night, my mother forgot to say, "Face the wall," and by the third day, I didn't feel a shift in the hallway when I came upstairs. That evening, I approached my mother as she was grating carrots for tuna salad. "Mommy," I said to her back, "why don't you get a divorce?" A girl in my class lived with only her mother.

Hand still on the metal grater, my mother turned to face me. "I thought about it, but I decided not to."

That was the most grownup thing she'd ever said to me. "Why?"

"I'm not going to give you my reasons." She went back to the carrots. "This discussion is over."

The next afternoon, Maxine and I were squatting on the sidewalk with her new ball and jacks. We were up to threesies when she said, "Here comes your father."

"It can't be," I said. "He's in Cuba."

"He's not. He's across the street."

I looked where she pointed and saw my father walking on 20th Avenue with his suitcase. He waved. Feeling my body shrink, I waved back and watched him check for cars before he crossed.

"Hi, Dad," I said as he bent to kiss my forehead. "You're home early."

"I decided not to stay," he said, then went into the house.

Maxine bounced the ball to continue her turn, as if nothing had changed. But everything had.

THE NEXT YEAR, WHEN I WAS NINE, my teacher sent home a note saying I did poorly on the E chart vision test and should be checked by an eye doctor.

"What gives her teacher the right to interfere?" my father screamed. "If she starts wearing glasses now, before you know it she won't be able to see without them!"

"Jack," my mother said in the low voice she used when he raised his. "I've been wearing glasses for years, and they haven't made my eyes worse."

For 15 minutes, I listened to their voices, alternating loud and soft, from the room I shared with Marvin. When my father's yelling subsided and I heard him go into the living room, I went into the kitchen, where my mother was getting supper ready.

"I'll make an appointment with the eye doctor tomorrow," she said.

Two weeks later, I tried on my glasses and felt as if I had discovered a new world. The face of the woman looking at frames across the room was in sharp focus. I hadn't known something like that was possible.

"Take those off!" my father shouted when we got home. "I don't care *how* much they cost!"

I hid the glasses in my sock drawer.

My father demonstrated eye exercises and made me practice them in the living room. After he released me, my mother called me into the kitchen. "You can wear the glasses in school and when you play in the street," she said. "You can also wear them in the house when Daddy's not home."

For a month, my father never saw me with my glasses on. Then, one day, he came home from work and I said, "Hi, Dad," in my usual way before I remembered I was wearing them. I was about to take them off when I realized he seemed not to have noticed. "Is it still raining out?" I asked.

"Letting up," he said.

Wow! I went into the kitchen to tell my mother.
"Good," she said. "Now you can wear them all the time."

When I turned ten, we moved back to Nona's house on 74th Street, this time into our own apartment, upstairs rear. With three bedrooms and a living room that could actually be used as a living room, it seemed palatial. Also, the block was prettier: no stores, lots of trees, and driveways—we called them alleys—between the houses. Our house, which Papoo had built in 1926, was brick with a small garden of forsythia and roses. Six steps, perfect for playing stoop ball, led up to the green front door. They were flanked by pillars topped with flowerpots.

I loved having my own room. As long as I didn't do anything to upset my father, like play my radio too loud, he rarely came in. I felt luckier than Marvin. He, too, had a room, but his wasn't closed off; I had to walk through it to get to mine. To give him privacy, my mother had an accordion-folding partition installed, creating a hall-like passageway along one side.

Whenever our apartment felt too stifling, all I had to do was walk into someone else's apartment. It wasn't necessary to knock. I simply opened the door. Across the landing at Aunt Mollie and Uncle Bill's, I played with my cousins: Jerry, Annie, and baby Robert. Aunt Mollie would often offer me half a stick of Juicy Fruit chewing gum. "I'm economical," she would say by way of explanation. Still, it was a treat, something I wasn't permitted in our apartment.

In the downstairs front, where we had lived when my father was in the war, were Nona, Papoo, and Aunt Sophia, the only one of my aunts not yet married. If Nona was baking *koulouria,* she would give me a piece of the sweet dough so I could roll it into a snake, join the ends to make a cookie-sized circle, and place it in a corner of her baking pan. I also spent many evenings in Aunt Sophia's room, watching her get ready for dates. As she put on makeup, I held her many lipsticks up to the dresses in her closet to see which matched. All the while, she listened to my stories about friends and school, or we planned our next outing: another Broadway show, or a trip to Poughkeepsie to see the house President Roosevelt lived in when he was a boy.

Downstairs in the rear were Aunt Sarah, Uncle Sam, and their daughter, Beattie, who was more like an aunt than a cousin. No

matter what the day of the year, there was a fat white *yahrzeit* candle burning in the darkened living room, for my cousin David, who had died of complications from heart surgery in his twenties. But Aunt Sarah's kitchen was a cheerful place, where she dispensed homemade cheese-and-spinach *calzonia*.

In the back basement, Nona and Papoo sewed. The front basement was for storage, with discarded clothes, furniture, toys, and books organized against the walls. Any relative, whether or not they lived in the building, could swap items in and out. The center of the floor was free for playing. Jerry's Lionel trains were set up on a gigantic table in one corner—a miniature world of trees and mountains, tunnels and bridges, houses and lakes. The front basement was also where Nona and Papoo held Passover seders, with long tables laid out end-to-end. There were always 30 or more relatives; the house seeming to expand to absorb them as they went freely up and down the stairs and into all the apartments except ours, borrowing chairs, collecting ice cubes, and lying down on any bed to rest.

Ours was the one apartment with a locked door, by order of my father. Whenever one of my aunts wanted to talk to my mother, she had to knock. I was often the one who answered. "Is your father home?" an aunt would whisper. If I said yes, she'd say, "I'll come back later." The only one of my mother's sisters not afraid was Aunt Rae, but she never tried to come in. My father had barred her permanently years before, when he had forbidden me to participate in something my cousins were doing and she'd said, "Oh yes she can!"

For Marvin, settling in meant getting a puppy. I was surprised that my father didn't object when he asked for one, just said it would be good to have a watchdog. Papoo brought us a mutt from one of his Brighton Beach customers, and we named him Brownie.

For me, settling in meant a trip to the basement with my mother to pick out furniture for my room. I chose a desk, a mirror that Uncle Bill hung on a gold upholstery braid hooked over the molding near my ceiling, and an armchair, for which Aunt Mollie sewed a tan slipcover. A small end table functioned as my vanity, holding a brush and comb. I'd never experienced privacy before and luxuriated in reading fairy tales curled up in my armchair without worrying that my father would yell, "What good is it going to do you in the future to find out whether a frog turns into a prince? It's not even *real!* You could be spending your time doing something *useful*."

He'd started teaching me typing when I was eight, and when I was ten he added Gregg stenography, "so if Mommy and I die, you'll be able to earn a living."

Each day I had to do one of the business letters in the maroon Gregg Shorthand book. First I translated the words into squiggles on a piece of lined paper. Then I rolled an unlined sheet into the typewriter and translated the squiggles back into words. *We are in receipt of your invoice of March 16.* I sometimes wondered where you were when you were *invoice* or *in receipt,* and why *invoice* was one word instead of two, but I didn't care enough to look anything up. All that mattered was handing my father two sheets of paper after supper and standing next to him while he checked them. Then I could return to my room and crochet or do an art project while I listened to classical music on WNYC.

Though I suspected my father had long since forgotten, he'd banned all other stations when I was in second grade and we still lived on 20th Avenue. It was shortly after he had come home from work one evening with two identical radios: brown plastic, AM only. He set them on the dresser in the room Marvin and I shared and demonstrated how to use the volume control to make them so soft we could each hear only our own. In the days that followed, I listened all around the dial. One day, the announcer described a doll with eyes that opened and closed. You could give her a bottle of real water, and when you held her up it would trickle out. She could be yours if you mailed in $5.00. I already had two dolls, but this one sounded special. I wrote down the address.

I didn't ask for the doll. My father would have said it wasn't educational. My mother would have told me to use my allowance. I had saved $4.50 from the 25 cents she gave me each week. Marvin, younger, got ten cents. After I swear-to-god promised I would pay him back, he lent me five dimes. In my neatest printing, I wrote a letter, Scotch-taped one dollar in coins to the bottom, and folded the paper over the four bills. I took a stamp and envelope from my parents' desk in the living room, then went down to the street to drop my letter into the corner mailbox.

On a Saturday morning a few weeks later, the mailman rang our bell. Something was too big to fit into the box! I followed my father downstairs and watched him sign for a package.

"What's this?" he said when the mailman left. He opened the box, and there was my beautiful doll, lying with her eyes shut. He

lifted her out and shook her in front of my face. "Where did this come from?"

"I sent away for it," I said, watching her eyelids bounce open and closed. "I used my allowance."

"Where did you hear about it?"

"On the radio."

"You sent away for something you heard about on the *radio*?"

I thought he was going to hit me, but he started up the stairs, muttering about "people advertising to children." He walked into the bedroom, where he set the doll on the dresser between the radios. He turned mine on and began adjusting the dial. Voices unafraid of him flitted by.

"There," he said in his instruction voice. "This is WNYC. There are no advertisements on this station. Keep it here all the time. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

My father set Marvin's radio to WQXR, also a classical music station, and told him, too, never to change it. That didn't make sense. Marvin hadn't sent away for anything, and, besides, WQXR had advertisements. But when my father walked out, I stopped wondering about the stations. He hadn't taken the doll!

Now, two years later and in my own room with the door closed, I still honored my father's decree. Whenever the tuning on my radio started to drift, I adjusted the dial the tiniest bit, careful not to stray onto adjoining stations, as dangerous as Communist territory. Marvin was less obedient. Sometimes, walking through the passageway to my room, I heard a baseball game.

MY PARENTS, TOO, WERE ALWAYS PREPARING for the future. While my father copied bits of information from books onto pieces of paper at his bridge table in the living room, my mother worked with her education books in the kitchen, copying whole sentences or even a paragraph onto index cards that she kept in flip-top metal boxes.

After supper, my mother moved her books and cards to her bedroom, because I would be in the kitchen doing the dishes, a chore I hated. I wouldn't have minded if I could have used my own method: wash and rinse each dish under running water the first, and only, time I touched it. But I had to follow what my father called

"a system," which took over an hour. Scrape the plates onto several layers of newspaper. Fold the paper into a tight packet to keep flies from smelling the food, then place it in the garbage pail. Rinse each dish under running water and stack it on the drainboard. Fill the sink with soapy water. Put in all the dishes, wash them, and restack them on the drainboard. Empty the sink of the soapy water. Fill it with clear water. Dip in each dish before putting it in the rack to dry. I couldn't skip any steps because I never knew when the door between the living room and kitchen would open and my father would look in. During the intervals between checks, he stayed at his table in the living room so he could supervise Marvin's piano practice. The future, for my brother, was Concert Pianist.

I had begun piano lessons when I was five, at the home of a local teacher, with the understanding that I would practice a half hour a day on Nona's old black Pianola. Marvin had begged for lessons, too, and when he was five my mother started him with the same teacher. By then, the Pianola had been moved to our apartment on 20th Avenue, and we both practiced at home. It quickly became apparent that, while I was proficient, Marvin was gifted, so shortly after we moved back to 74th Street, my father decided the Pianola was no longer good enough and we got a new blond spinet. When Marvin was eight, my father took him to the Chatham Square School of Music in Manhattan, which awarded him a scholarship.

My father gradually increased Marvin's practice time until, by the time he was nine, it was two hours every afternoon and two hours more after supper. According to my father's rule, if Marvin made a mistake, he had to repeat the measure over and over, until he got it right many times. Marvin followed that rule in the evenings, when my father was home, but in the afternoons he played all his pieces straight through. Roller skating outside with girls on the block, I could hear the music coming through the window. It sounded as good as a concert.

Marvin's playing made washing the dishes a little less boring, as did the company of Brownie, who watched me from his corner in the foyer. My pleasure in the music never lasted long, though. Marvin might be playing Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2—I especially loved the end, with the left and right hands chasing each other up and down the keyboard—when I would hear a thud and the music would stop.

"Ow!" Marvin's voice.

"What do you do when you make a mistake?" My father's.

"Go back and play it over."

"Then why did you continue?"

"Because I really knew it. My hand just slipped."

Crack.

"What did I do this time?" Marvin would be whimpering now.

Another thud. "That'll teach you not to be fresh!"

I could picture Marvin, shoulder throbbing, cheek inflamed, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. His face was always streaked at the end of his practice.

I was glad I wasn't talented. Glad, too, that my mother had recently switched me to guitar, saying only, "It's time you learned another instrument." No one cared how long I practiced, and I liked being able to accompany myself while I sang "Swanee River" and "My Old Kentucky Home" alone in my room. I also enjoyed being able to play guitar at the two or three musicales my parents organized. Held in our living room, they were for any of my friends or Marvin's who played an instrument. Each event was a combination party and recital, with the children performing, their parents clapping, and everyone eating my mother's tuna salad and coleslaw.

The parties were fun. Listening to Marvin's evening practice wasn't. I never understood why he persisted in answering back, not only about the piano, but other things, too. Occasionally my father got so enraged he beat Marvin with a strap, and once I saw him bunch Marvin up and kick him down the foyer like a football.

The most afraid I ever was for my brother was the day, shortly after he got a tool kit for his ninth birthday, that I saw a sprinkling of sawdust on the olive-green carpet and a gash in the piano leg above it.

"Daddy's going to kill you," I warned. Marvin seemed unconcerned.

When my father came home, he looked at the piano leg for a few long seconds but said nothing. Nor did he speak about it during supper. The tension was so great I would have preferred his yelling. After Marvin and I left the table, my father spoke quietly to my mother in the kitchen, an occurrence so rare I worried even more. Then he called Marvin into the living room and spoke quietly to him. When they came out, Marvin told me his practice had been reduced to three hours a day.

The number of hours changed. The procedure did not. Screaming and hitting mixed with beautiful music remained a part of every evening. Sometimes, when I finished the dishes, I went to my room to lose myself in a book. More often, when I couldn't ignore the sounds, I waited for my father's yelling to get so loud he wouldn't hear the door opening, then slipped into the hall and went downstairs to Nona's.

I often found her in the kitchen playing Canasta with my aunts—not only those who lived in the building but any who happened to be visiting. My mother was frequently there, too, though I never knew when she had left our apartment. She looked relaxed here.

"Hi, Vivvy," Aunt Sophia would say. "Will you join us?" And when I sat down: "Now we can play partners."

Our cards competed for space on the red checked tablecloth with coffee cups and a plate of koulouria. Nona would bring me a glass of milk. Aunt Sophia might ask whether I would take her pumps to the shoemaker after school—leather lifts, no taps. Aunt Rae, who made and sold jewelry in addition to her teaching job, sometimes fished in her large bag and presented me with a necklace. No one mentioned the backdrop of music, yelling, and thuds we could all hear. For me it was unreal, like the sound of a TV program coming from a neighbor's house, so I was able to concentrate on the game.

At some point the music stopped, and there was only the gentle slap of the cards. The quiet was harder to ignore than the piano practice had been. "I guess we'll be going up," my mother would say, tension back in her voice. "It's getting late." ▪

CHAPTER 4

Cookie

I BOARDED THE BUS along with Ronnie and Iris, friends from school and my Girl Scout troop. We didn't know any of the other campers, but those who had been to Quidnunc before told stories and sang camp songs, and by the time the bus wound its way up the dirt road two hours later, we were all bellowing: "We're here, because we're here, because we're here, because we're here!"

I had always loved the country, and that summer, when I was 12, I looked forward to escaping the Brooklyn heat and being away from my family. My mother had no objection when I asked to go. Girl Scout camp was not expensive. My father didn't involve himself in the discussion, which meant it was OK with him.

After the director's welcome speech in the parking lot, we followed our counselors to our units. Ivy, the head counselor of mine, read our tent assignments from her clipboard—five girls to a tent—and told us to get our trunks from the pile near the campfire circle. As we paired off to help one another, the camp magic began: two girls, strangers when they each took the side handle of a trunk, stumbled together over tree roots on the narrow path and were friends by the time they hoisted their burden onto the wooden tent platform and started back for the other trunk.

It was the tradition at Quidnunc, which means *What now?* in Latin, that everyone, campers as well as counselors, had to choose a nickname. I decided on Cookie. Ivy wrote *Cookie* on the chart of morning chores that hung from a nail on a tree, and Ginger, the waterfront counselor, painted *Cookie* on my bathing cap in red,

the color denoting my swimming group: Beginners.

Our daily routine seldom varied. The counselors woke us at 7:00, when it was sometimes so cold we could see our breath. Breakfast could be hot cereal, eggs, or pancakes—sometimes in the dining hall, sometimes around the campfire. All the girls helped with cleanup, drawing lots for wash, Brillo, rinse, dry, and put-away. We sang camp songs while we worked, told jokes, and teased the counselors. Next came housekeeping: making our cot-beds, sweeping the tent platforms, unrolling the canvas side-flaps to shake out spiders and leaves, then rerolling them. By 10:00, we were ready for swimming, boating, arts and crafts, and hiking.

Iris and Ronnie missed electricity, flush toilets, hot water, and television, but I loved everything about Quidnunc: singing around the campfire; trudging up a mountain to watch the sun set; going on overnight hikes, when we slept in bedrolls on the ground and looked up at the stars. Most of all, I loved being Cookie in a world where the same rules that applied to me applied to everyone else.

I even liked hating swimming. The lake was cold, and we all begged Ginger, who stood on the dock with a sweatshirt over her dry bathing suit, to let us come out of the water. "Sorry, but y'all have to stay in," she drawled in her Southern accent, which she didn't mind that we imitated. Between laps, we compared fingernails and teeth-chatter to see whose were bluest and loudest.

Hating the food was fun, too. You had to eat everything on your plate, including the milky-green mash that was supposed to be a vegetable. But as the counselor served each item, she asked whether you wanted a yes-thank-you or a no-thank-you portion. The no-thank-you was a teaspoonful.

When the four weeks were over, most of the girls on the bus back to Brooklyn, me among them, alternated between sobbing and singing the camp song.

AFTER MY TASTE OF GIRL SCOUT CAMP, I found the apartment on 74th Street more oppressive than ever. I asked my mother if we could do things the Quidnunc way, like having no-thank-you portions. She thought it was a good idea but said my father would never deviate from his rule that Marvin and I had to eat the full portion of everything on our plates, no matter how much we disliked it. I knew she was right.

In September, I started seventh grade at Seth Low Junior High, where the students came from several elementary schools, and I added Carol, Diane, and Susan to my circle of friends. I didn't think about camp when I was out with them, but at home I pined for it so viscerally that I felt what the *sick* part of homesick meant, a concept I had understood only intellectually before, from reading *Heidi*. When we studied Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" in school, I copied the last line into my notebook: *If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?* I asked my mother whether I could go to camp for six weeks the following summer, and she agreed.

My mother was my ally, but she could also be unpredictable.

The previous year, a few days before my 11th birthday, Aunt Sophia had knocked on our door, ascertained that my father was home, and thrust a gift-wrapped box into my hand, whispering, "For you, an early present."

I opened it in my room to find a white blouse with eyelet trim—the most beautiful blouse I'd ever owned. I tried it on and went into the kitchen.

"Mommy, don't I look pretty in my new blouse?" I pirouetted so she could see front and back.

My mother said nothing, just looked angry and slapped my face.

For a second, I was so stunned I couldn't move. Then, cheek burning, I returned to my room.

If I had left drops of milk on the table, I could have laughed this off as an absurd reaction. My mother often screamed if Marvin or I didn't wipe off the table, sometimes hitting us with a wooden hanger because "it hurts me when I use my hand." But this time I'd done nothing wrong. It was almost as if my mother couldn't tolerate my very existence. I had the same feeling I'd had a few months before, when she brought me to the doctor because I had a vaginal infection. "You're disgusting!" she'd said when we got home and she was helping me apply the medicine he'd prescribed.

I put the blouse back in its box and laid it on a shelf.

But the love mommy was still walled off from the hate mommy, and, despite what had happened, I was able to enjoy being with my mother the following Tuesday for our prearranged Time.

When I was ten, she'd gotten the idea from one of her child psychology books to schedule an hour a week with each of us, to do whatever we wanted. My Time was Tuesdays at four. I looked forward to it all week. Sometimes I asked my mother to sit in my room

and watch me work on an arts-and-crafts project while I talked about my friends or things I did in Girl Scouts. Once, I wanted to show her the apartment house on Avenue P where Pat, a girl in my class, lived. My mother and I walked to Avenue P, looked at the outside of the house, then walked back. I chatted the whole way—about the girls in my class who were friends with Pat and why I thought she might want to be friends with me. My mother never screamed or hit during Time, which started and ended like a regular appointment.

She continued with Time until the school term ended. I would have liked it if she had started again in September, but she didn't, and I didn't ask. For a week in October, though, when my mother used me as the subject in a study for one of her education courses, I enjoyed something similar: each day, for an hour, she read me questions and wrote down my answers. I felt close to her during those sessions, not only because she paid attention to everything I said, but because I liked knowing I was an asset to a part of her life that was important to her.

I had gotten a glimpse of that life a few days before the blouse incident, when we were walking on Bay Parkway and I heard someone shout, "Dad! There's my teacher!" Seconds later, a boy stopped in front of us and said, "Hi, Mrs. Conan." He looked excited to see her.

"Hello, Henry," my mother said in a formal voice that I supposed she used in her classroom. I was jealous of the way she smiled at him.

"Hello, Mrs. Conan," said a man coming up behind the boy. "I'm Henry's father. It's nice to meet you. He talks about you all the time."

"It's good to meet you, too," my mother said, shaking his hand. Then she looked at Henry. "Are you going shopping today?"

"I got a new pair of sneakers." He held up a bag.

"Very nice," my mother said. She put her arm around my shoulder and drew me forward. "This is my daughter, Vivian. We just bought a locket for her birthday."

Henry said, "Hi," and his father said, "Happy Birthday, Vivian."

I felt proud that they saw I belonged to her.

My mother also tried to stand up for me where my father was concerned.

Ours was the only apartment in the building without a television set: my father didn't approve of them. So the day my teacher

assigned a TV program to watch for homework, I arranged with Aunt Mollie to see it in her apartment. When my father learned of the plan, he forbade me to go.

"Jack," my mother said in her quiet voice, "it's for school. It's about Abraham Lincoln."

"I don't care *what* it's about! The teacher has no right to tell her what to do at home!"

When it became apparent that my mother couldn't get him to relent, I was distraught. She asked whether I wanted her to write my teacher a note explaining why I wasn't turning in a report. That would be embarrassing but better than getting a bad mark. I told her to write it.

SPRING EVENTUALLY DID COME, along with my mother's announcement that it was time to redecorate my room. It had never occurred to me that you could redo a room, especially when nothing was broken, but it gave me something to look forward to besides camp.

My mother didn't ask my father's permission. She'd stopped doing that when we still lived on 20th Avenue and she wanted to get a phone. My father said we didn't need a phone and relented only when she became a day-to-day substitute teacher and had to wait for a call each morning. Now, my mother earned more as a teacher than he did in the post office, and she had her own checkbook.

"Jack," she said one evening, walking through the living room with a pile of laundry, "the carpenter's coming tonight to measure Vivian's room."

"What carpenter?"

"The one I hired to build some furniture."

"What's wrong with the furniture she has?" His voice was beginning to rise.

"She's going to be a teenager soon. She needs a place where she can bring her friends, and a place to study and keep her clothes."

"What's wrong with her closet?"

My mother answered his protests, one by one, in a dead voice. My closet, the little portable one he had kept his own clothes in when we lived on 20th Avenue, was too small, she said. My desk was shabby and didn't have enough storage space. Then she continued on her way with the laundry.

The carpenter's knock came moments later, putting an end to my father's muttering. He remained in the living room, while, in my room with my mother, I watched the carpenter sketch plans for a wall unit that included a closet, desk, and shelves. Work was to begin as soon as I left for camp and would be finished by the time I returned.

THE MOMENT I BOARDED THE BUS and greeted the girls I knew, some of whom I'd been writing to all winter, I felt I had truly come home. Now *I* was part of the group that told camp stories to the newcomers and led the singing, and when the director gave her welcome speech in the parking lot, I knew everything she was going to say before she said it.

I was in the next-to-oldest unit, Neppies Nook, named after Neptune because we were closest to the lake. Without Ronnie and Iris, I had no ties to my Brooklyn-Vivian life. The girls and counselors in Neppies Nook were my only family, Camp Quidnunc my only world. I was completely Cookie, completely happy.

Jinx was my favorite counselor. The other two were funnier, but not as soft. I contrived to sit at Jinx's table in the dining hall and get into her group whenever we divided up for activities. Within days, she became like the doctors and nurses whose molecules floated in the air: I felt her watching over me, knowing what I was thinking and feeling every moment.

The YellowSweaterLady had been the only other real person to become part of what I now thought of as the Atmosphere. For several years after I'd met her with my mother, I'd been certain that one day her hand would reach down through the air, scoop me out of my world, and take me to hers, where I would live in her house and be her little girl forever. The longer that took to happen, the more the YellowSweaterLady faded from the Atmosphere, until, by now, she was no longer in it.

Unlike the YellowSweaterLady, whom I had met only once, Jinx was part of my everyday life. I could be feeling her disembodied Atmosphere presence while I walked down one of the paths, maybe to hang my bathing suit on the line, and her in-person version would chance to come toward me from the opposite direction. "Hi, Jinx," I would say in the most surprised voice I could muster, as if she were the last person I could have been thinking of.

The only time her Atmosphere and in-person versions came together as if they belonged together was when we sang around the campfire at night. Jinx was usually at the back of the circle, so I couldn't see her face. The faces I could see were noses or eyes that flickered orange then disappeared, giving way to others. In this magic place Jinx's voice, blending with yet separate from everyone else's—she was the only one singing harmony—seemed to be coming from another dimension.

Every night after campfire, we snuggled under our blankets, under the canvas, under the trees, under the stars. The counselors, standing near the dying fire, sang "Taps." When their last note faded, the only sounds were from crickets and the occasional snapping of a twig.

One night, lying under my blankets in the safety of everything that was familiar—alone, yet not alone—I began to feel vaguely uneasy. I listened to the regular breathing of my tentmates and the murmuring of the counselors sitting on logs by the embers. The leaves rustled. I felt something shift inside me and rustle along with them. *Eeeeeee-naaaaaaah.* The wail was loud inside my head, but I knew I hadn't made an outside sound.

The breeze blew through the tent, taking a layer of me with it as it passed over my face. The forest was suddenly menacing, filled with writhing shapes I could barely make out. *Nah-SAAAAAH-koh-meh!* The wail was louder this time. I felt myself leaking out of my skin into the shapes, felt the shapes flowing back into me. To keep from dissolving, I buried my face under the blankets and held onto the sides of the mattress.

"Get away from me!" Oh god. That was an outside scream.

"Cookie, wake up!" my friend Lolly called from her cot. "You're having a nightmare."

I was glad she thought I was sleeping.

Footsteps. A hand on my back through the blankets. "Cookie, what's the matter?" It was Jinx.

I wanted to say, *Nothing. I'm Cookie, here in the tent with my friend*s. But I was also not Cookie. I was part of the howling forest and the undulating mass of scary shapes sucking me in.

"Get away from me!" I shrieked, throwing off the covers and sitting up.

I squinted into the beam of Jinx's flashlight. She pointed it toward the floor. "It's me. Jinx."

I began to sob. I choked, coughed until I caught my breath, howled into the night. My tentmates offered me tissues and tried to take my hand. The safer I felt with everyone around me, the more I let myself slide into the terror without holding back. I pulled my sheets, clutched my blankets, and kicked. It was a relief to let the fear well up and take over my body. I knew I was acting crazy, but I didn't feel crazy. I felt an enormous release, and though I really was frightened, I knew there was nothing to be afraid of.

My animal cries had a momentum of their own and kept escalating until they crested with a long howl. When it ended, I whimpered softly, coming back into my body, into Cookie. Exhausted but calm, I sat on the heap of tangled blankets and let Jinx put her arm around my shoulder.

"Hi," I said, smiling weakly at my tentmates as they came into focus.

"Hi, Cookie. That was some nightmare."

I nodded.

"OK, girls, it's almost eleven," Jinx said. "Back to your beds."

As she helped me straighten my blankets and tucked me in, I felt calmer than I ever had, as if something wordless that was trapped inside me had finally come out, been heard, and gone back inside. ▪