Linda was going there to watch the children: two little girls with fairy tale names. That’s what she told her friends back east. “I’m an au pair,” she said, liking the foreign words on her tongue. The strange feel of the title, the importance of the role, delighted her. But as everyone helped her pack her things into an illegally parked U-Haul on Comm Ave, as someone tucked into the glove compartment the AAA triptych that would take her on the fastest route to San Francisco, and someone else put rolls of quarters for tolls inside the ashtray, they kept asking her, “Are you sure? Are you sure?” They heaved one box after another up the noisy metal ramp and into the dark gaping back of the truck, where Linda waited to slide them to the back. The irritating sound of cardboard against metal made her shiver every time.

It was Susan, her friend since seventh grade who actually said it: “Maybe it’s too soon to make so many changes.” Everyone was thinking the same thing; Linda knew that. Her mother had been dead exactly two months. She was, officially, an orphan. Around her, friends with concerned faces gave her advice and opinions. San Francisco was so far, they said. She didn’t know anyone there. She would be lonely, sad, or worse. But what could be worse than what she had already endured?

Even as Susan leaned in to the U-Haul’s door to give Linda a farewell hug and kiss, she whispered, “They say don’t make any big changes for a year. It’s still not too late to change your mind.” Linda laughed and pushed her friend away. “Let me go already,” she told her.

Across the entire expanse of the United States, in a lilac house in a part of the city called Noe Valley—“Make sure you pronounce the E or everyone will know you’re a stranger,” Gaby, the little girls’ mother, had told her—a family was waiting for her. Just last night the father had called to double-check her route with her, to make sure she had his number at work in case any problems arose. They were waiting for her, Linda kept thinking. It made her smile to imagine it.

Ann Hood

Confabulation

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On a lark, as her mother lay dying, she had responded to an ad in *The Globe* for a national nanny agency looking for mature, qualified women. She filled out the application with great care, exaggerating the importance of her part-time job at the main branch of the Boston Public Library, leaving out that she was on leave from graduate school where she had been studying toward a master’s in Library Science. She emphasized her role in the library’s Story Hour for Toddlers and her certifications in CPR and Lifesaving.

Then one day, when everything seemed bleakest, a fat package arrived from San Francisco filled with snapshots and children’s drawings. Certain images from that package were fixed in her mind: a bowl of big lemons on the kitchen table, the fresh lavender that grew in a terra-cotta pot by the sink, the particular shades of blue and green that Gaby painted her pots. Giddy, Linda realized that they were trying to impress her, to seduce her into coming. In one photograph, the family stood on a beach and the sky behind them was so blue that it looked fake.

It was all so different, so much brighter than what she had been around this past year: the most snowfall Boston had had in eighty years, her mother first in the hospital, then that nursing home, the smells of sick people, of dying people. When Linda looked out her own window into her own backyard after the snow finally melted, after her mother finally died, she saw only brown—mud, bare trees, dead plants in cracked pots.

When she accepted the position, she’d told them she’d maybe take some classes at the Art Institute. She said she’d maybe like to paint. But really Linda had no plans except to take care of those little girls. Her apartment, one large room over Gaby’s studio, had walls covered with fat stenciled fruit, a skylight, and cobalt blue tiles on the bathroom floor. It was clean and empty and it too was reaching out across the mountains and rivers and cities and towns between there and Boston, waiting for Linda. Beckoning her, she thought, as she waved ferocious good-byes to the cluster of worried faces on the corner.
The house was dark when she pulled the U-Haul into the driveway. Linda tried not to be disappointed, even though she had called Bryce at his office and told him she’d be getting in around ten that night. Even though he’d said “Terrific” with such enthusiasm, Linda had actually started to cry. Stepping out of the truck, she stood in the strange quiet for a moment, looking around.

The air smelled of citrus and eucalyptus, intoxicating. Other houses had lights on and she could make out pieces of other people’s lives—a cat peering out at her, a woman washing dishes. This was her street now, Linda reminded herself. That cat, that woman, they were parts of her life. The thought comforted her and gave her the boost she needed to climb the stairs to the front door. Before she knocked, lights came on inside and the door opened.

“I knew I heard someone out here,” Gaby said.

Linda took a step backwards. In the snapshots they’d sent, Gaby had just had the youngest girl a few months earlier. She had looked soft and puffy faced, pretty in a bruised way. But here she stood now, sleek and smooth, her copper-colored hair cropped short as a boy’s.

Bryce loomed behind his wife. “Let her in!” he said.

When Gaby stepped aside to make room for Linda, Bryce said, “Come in and have a glass of wine. Driving all this way must have you completely zoned.”

He was big and attractive in a fraternity boy sort of way, blond and blue eyed, muscled arms showing from his faded Berkeley tee shirt, jeans that fit just so, tanned bare feet. Not handsome exactly, but the kind of boy Linda would have had a crush on in school. She would have admired his popularity, the way everyone seemed to like him. That was never the kind of boy she actually dated; the small, quiet ones always liked her best.

Gaby asked, “Do you want some chardonnay? Or maybe a pinot noir would be nice?”


“Anything really,” she said, afraid if she said more it would be as if
she were taking sides. She half-sat half-dropped onto the sofa, an oversized thing with too many pillows and bold colored stripes.

Gaby poured white wine into three glasses and sat in a chair across from Linda. “So,” she said with a sigh, “you’re finally here.” Then she added, “Thank God. We’ve been desperate for you. Haven’t we Bryce?”

“Desperate is right,” he said, and sat down right beside Linda, his weight causing the cushions to bend toward him slightly. “Gaby has a big show at the end of summer and she needs to get moving. Alice tried to stay up to greet you. Didn’t she, Gaby?”

“She made you a picture,” Gaby said, nodding.

The wine was good and cold, a California chardonnay. I am an au pair in California, Linda said to herself.

“We can go over schedules and things tomorrow,” Gaby said. “I’ll show you around, explain a few things—”

“Give her a break, Gaby,” Bryce said. His voice was the sort that boomed into a room and then bounced around awhile. “The poor thing’s completely spent. Aren’t you, Linda?”

“I said tomorrow, hon. I said we’ll work out all the details tomorrow.”

Suddenly, Linda felt exhausted. She thought that if she were to close her eyes, she could sleep right here on the striped sofa.

“Come,” Gaby said, and put her hand on Linda’s arm.

Linda jumped. Had she fallen asleep? Embarrassed, she got to her feet awkwardly. Bryce was gone. She had dozed off.

“I’m sorry—” Linda began.

But Gaby shushed her. Taking her hand, she led her through the kitchen and outside toward her own apartment. Gaby’s hand was rough, the pads of her fingers hard. Her mother’s hands had been unusually soft, always protected from housework with long, bright, yellow gloves. The roughness of Gaby’s was unexpected and for a confused moment in the dark backyard Linda thought that maybe it was Bryce leading her. But as they passed into the soft light above the door to the studio, of course it was Gaby unlocking the door, opening up for Linda to go inside.
“I’m so tired,” Linda managed to say.
“Of course you are,” Gaby said. “You’ve been through so much.”
Her voice was like butter, Linda thought. Her head leaned toward it when Gaby spoke again.
“If you need anything you know where to find us.”
Linda nodded and then, as if she were walking through water, made her way heavily up the stairs to her new home.

If she sat in a certain position and craned her neck, she could see right into their bedroom. Linda watched them the very next morning: Bryce walking around, naked, stretching, scratching his head sleepily, dividing up sections of the newspaper, and taking his parts into the bathroom; Gaby appearing with a pot of coffee and two cups. Even from here Linda could see that they were Gaby’s own cups, painted those Caribbean colors. She wore a white nightgown and black Buddy Holly type glasses. When Bryce came back into the bedroom, he went over to Gaby and removed her glasses and she lifted her arms so he could remove her nightgown.

Guilty, Linda looked away.

Everything was so different here she wasn’t sure what to take in first. All of the linens were white, all of the furniture a light wood accented with blues. The pound of coffee Gaby had left for her was black and slightly oily. In the refrigerator there was a container of homemade granola, a bowl of strawberries so large and so red Linda found them almost obscene.

The simple act of walking around the small apartment examining all of these things made Linda, inexplicably, cry. Her apartment in Boston was subterranean, a one-bedroom at the corner of Comm and Mass Avenues that was a steal because it was in a basement. At night, when her mother first got sick, Linda used to sit and watch people’s feet passing by her kitchen window. Totes rubbers slipped over shoes, low heeled pumps, galoshes. She’d kept a mental tally of what passed as if all those shoes, all those people going somewhere, could keep her anchored.
They hadn’t, of course. And as the months passed, and her mother grew worse instead of better, Linda’s apartment seemed to get even darker. The heavy furniture she’d inherited from her grandmother, with its layers of polish and the cloying scent of rose sachet, began to suck the air out of each room. At night, Linda would wake up, gasping for breath. By then she’d taken a leave from her job at the Public Library, a leave from graduate school. By then it was easier to sleep in a cardiac chair in her mother’s room at the nursing home than to go back to that dark, airless place.

Linda did not know how long she sat in her new bright apartment in Noe Valley remembering all that darkness before Alice, the older girl, burst in with her picture—a crazy swirl of orange and yellow fingerpaint. Gaby came in behind her, breathless, holding the baby Aurora on her hip.

“Did you knock?” she said to Alice. Then to Linda, “I told her to knock.”

“It’s fine,” Linda said.

Alice had climbed onto her lap and was studying her face.

“Do you dye your hair?” she asked Linda. “Mommy does. And she uses wax here because she has a moustache.” Alice giggled. “Mommy says all girls do but I don’t and Aurora doesn’t and neither does Miss Winkle.”

“Her teacher,” Gaby explained. “Miss Winkle is perfect. And you are too. Just wait and see.”

“I love Miss Winkle,” Alice said, leaning into Linda comfortably.

Linda closed her eyes and breathed in Alice’s little girl smell: sweat and baby shampoo and Play-Doh.

Around her, the cooing and squeals from the baby and Gaby’s buttery voice wrapped around Linda, cocooning her.

The woman beside Linda on the bench at the playground said, “How old is your little girl?”

“Almost four,” Linda said. She hesitated, then added, “But I’m the au pair, not the mother.”

“Oh?” the woman said, arching her eyebrows. “But she looks so
much like you!”

Linda smiled, filled with foolish, misplaced pride.

Every morning Linda watched Bryce and Gaby, staying a little longer at the window each time. “There is no way,” Susan told her in one of their late-night long-distance talks, “that a couple married for seven years has sex every day.” But Bryce and Gaby did. Every morning: “What if they see you watching them?” Susan asked her in that nervous way she’d developed whenever she talked to Linda. “They won’t,” Linda assured her. She was too embarrassed to explain what she had to do to see them, the balancing, the craning. “Don’t worry,” she told Susan, which is how she ended every conversation they had.

When Gaby took Alice to preschool, Linda took care of the baby, who mostly napped, leaving Linda free to wander their house. Sometimes she looked through the rows of books that lined the upstairs family room: gardening and travel and architecture. Not many novels, except the ones that had probably been required reading back in college like *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Sometimes she looked at the ointments and lotions on Gaby’s dresser. She used things made out of cucumbers and kiwi and oatmeal. Everything was light—lightly scented, lightly colored, and, when Linda actually dipped into a few jars, light on her skin, like jumping into water.

Gaby always went directly to her studio as soon as she got back. One of the few rules they had here was that she was not to be disturbed under any circumstances. She had shown Linda around, let her peek into the kiln, feel the wet clay, run her hands around the smooth glazed pots. She’d given her some pieces that hadn’t come out quite right and Linda had accepted them reluctantly. They didn’t look imperfect to her. Well, they are, Gaby had laughed, pointing out a bubble or crack or colors that had bled too much. Even long after Gaby had left the studio for the day, the
thick chalky smell filled Linda’s apartment like a sweet drug.

Some days, Linda ate lunch with Gaby, big salads filled with bitter lettuces and lots of crunchy things like sprouts and daikon and jicama. It made Linda’s jaw ache to eat one of Gaby’s salads, but still she hoped every day that Gaby would ask her to stay. If not, she was free until two when she would put the baby in the stroller and go to pick up Alice at school. Then the three of them went to the playground or the children’s bookstore for Story Hour or for ice cream, staying out until dinner time.

Aurora was such an easy baby that Linda didn’t have to do very much for her: keep her in a clean diaper, feed her, be sure to put on #45 sunscreen whenever they went outside. But Alice was demanding. “Where’s Boston?” she’d ask. “Why don’t you have a boyfriend? Did you ever have a puppy?” Her questions wore Linda out. At first, she tried to answer them all, but eventually she just chose one and made a story around it.

“I do have a boyfriend but he’s very busy living on the island of Crete and digging for fossils. He’s an anthropologist.” Linda went on and on, inventing details, showing Alice pictures of Crete in her father’s atlas, explaining what anthropologists do, what they find, how they find it. This type of answer satisfied Alice and after the first time it didn’t even bother Linda that her stories were mostly untrue.

For example, the boyfriend: they had never officially broken up so technically he was still her boyfriend. And he wasn’t an anthropologist. In fact, he hated getting his hands dirty. Instead, he was a PhD candidate at Yale, studying Ancient Greece. He was pale-skinned with a sad goatee and orthotics in his shoes. He could carry on a conversation entirely in Latin. Shellfish and strawberries and peanuts gave him a rash, red welts up and down his cheeks and arms, hot and ugly.

“Will you marry him?” Alice asked, her eyes wide and misty.

“No,” Linda said, closing the atlas. “Definitely not.”

On Thursdays, Linda ate dinner with the family. Bryce was in charge
on those nights. He grilled salmon steaks in a soy sauce marinade, or fat hamburgers with green chiles and cheese. Back home, Linda had considered herself a good enough cook. She sometimes had dinner parties where she’d roast a chicken or make her mother’s recipe for lasagna. But eating Bryce’s dinners, or even one of Gaby’s salads, Linda was embarrassed by the pride she used to feel at that lasagna. When Bryce leaned close to Linda and told her that toasted sesame oil and lime gave his marinade extra flavor, Linda found herself blushing. “I bet you’re a wonderful cook,” Bryce said to her one night under the paper Japanese lanterns on the deck. “Oh,” she said, shaking her head, “No. Not really.”

It felt to Linda, as she sat on their redwood deck eating food she’d never had back in Boston, drinking California wines, talking about perennials, Frank Lloyd Wright, and bike-rides through France to this couple—both beautiful, Linda had decided—that she was as far from her old life as she could possibly be. Nothing at all was the same. It was impossible to think about last winter here. It was impossible to believe how her mother had died and left her all alone. She felt as if she was shedding all of that old life and becoming something else, something different. But what?

“You found Body Time,” Gaby said.

Instead of answering, Linda shifted the baby to her other knee. There was a weird buzzing in her head, as if a bee had somehow gotten in.

“I recognize that scent. Lavender bath oil,” Gaby said. “I use it too.”

Linda smiled and smoothed Aurora’s unruly hair. The buzzing intensified. When she looked up again, Gaby was busy peeling an avocado, her pencil thin eyebrows furrowed as she worked.

“Can I do anything?” Linda asked.

“Just keep holding Aurora,” Gaby said, slicing into the bumpy skin of another avocado. “You’re a godsend, Linda. You know that, don’t you?”
While her mother lay dying, Linda had waited for the time when they would repair old hurts, replay fun times, say good-bye. Her father had died when Linda was seven, so her whole childhood was wrapped up with her mother. The two of them in the small house in Brookline that her parents had bought as a starter home. That house had always needed something fixed; it wasn’t meant to be lived in so long and so hard by the same people.

Linda had plied her mother with questions at the end: Should I sell the house? Did you love Daddy more than anything in the world? Were you a happy girl? Do you have regrets? But her mother had pursed her lips and turned her head. Linda waited for their relationship to take a turn somehow, to change and resolve itself. Instead, her mother simply died one day while Linda was at the Koffee Kart in the lobby buying a French roast and an elephant’s ear.

In her daydreams since that day, her mother told her things—secrets, advice, opinions. In her daydreams, her mother took the time to say a proper farewell.

“You’ve known such tragedy,” Bryce said to Linda one Thursday night.

It had rained earlier, a brief hard downpour that left the air smelling like grass and salt. They had finished dinner and Gaby was putting the girls to bed. Bryce and Linda sat side by side in the fading light, finishing their wine, nibbling the meringues that Gaby had bought at the new French bakery on Union Street. Linda could almost believe that this was her house, her husband, her life: that was how right everything felt at that moment.

“Yet you don’t wear your tragedies the way some people do,” Bryce was saying. “Like Gaby.”

“Gaby?” Linda said, surprised.

“Her own mother killed herself. I thought she told you.”
Linda shook her head. Then she added, quietly, “My father did that.”

Bryce took both of her hands in both of his. “How awful,” he said.

It had been so long since she had felt a man like this, close and intimate, that Linda couldn’t catch her breath for an instant. The history student at Yale had not liked to hold hands; it made him uncomfortable.

“How can you be so cheerful? How can you be so absolutely open like you are?”

Linda didn’t want any more talking. She just wanted to go on like this, her hands in his, the sweet sugary taste of the cookies coating her tongue, the light going from the sky.

But Gaby burst out the door, noisily, announcing exactly how many times she’d had to read The Very Quiet Cricket. Bryce slipped his hands from hers quietly.

“All you have to do is say ‘no’ after the tenth or twelfth time, Gaby,” he said. He turned to face his wife, leaving Linda suddenly all alone.

——

Linda watched from her window as Bryce pulled Gaby’s white nightgown off, over her head. Their routine never changed. Every morning was the same and every morning Linda watched, right up until this moment.

Today, she waited a little longer at the window. Gaby stood naked at her bedroom window, facing out, as if she were offering herself to Linda. That buzzing came back again. But not in her head. Lower this time, in her gut. The thing was, Linda liked sex. The men she’d been to bed with—there had been four—were not classically attractive. They’d been flawed somehow: too many moles or so thin that their stomachs had been concave. But still Linda had wanted them, had liked their tongues and hands running up along her body. Watching Gaby and Bryce, remembering her own lovers, Linda bent over slightly, into that buzzing. She saw Gaby’s breasts, small, a little droopy, and watched as Bryce bent to put one in his mouth. Then Linda did, finally, leave the window.
“You’ve done something different, haven’t you?” Gaby said. She was planting flowers in enormous pots out in the yard and looked up as Linda returned from the salon.

“I put a little red in my hair,” Linda said, defensively. “That’s all.” Absently, Gaby ran her fingers through her own copper hair. “It looks nice,” she said to Linda. She kept studying Linda’s face until she got what she wanted. “Your eyebrows! You’ve plucked them!”

Linda squirmed under Gaby’s scrutiny. She hadn’t intentionally copied Gaby’s own hair and brows, but now she felt foolish, caught.

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed,” Gaby said. “You look wonderful. Your face is so opened up this way.”

“I just wanted something a little different,” Linda said.

“Yes. To experiment. Absolutely. Why, I’ve been platinum. Very Annie Lennox, you know? And before that I had this dreadful bob. When I met Bryce I actually had a perm.”

Gaby waited for some acknowledgement from Linda, but Linda, who had never changed her hair so drastically, had nothing to say, and finally Gaby went back to her gardening.

The shirt was 100 percent cotton, slightly oversized, with brown wooden buttons and wrinkled sleeves from Gaby’s rolling them up so much. Linda took it from Gaby’s closet and wore it to sleep in at night. She kept expecting Gaby to mention that it was missing, but she never did.

Gaby took Alice to visit friends in Mill Valley for the day, leaving Linda with Aurora. “We’ll be back late late late,” Alice chanted as Linda helped Gaby load up the car. “They have a swimming pool,” Alice shouted out the window to Linda, who stood clutching the baby and waving goodbye. Their leaving filled her with relief, as if they were guests who had stayed too long.
While the baby napped in her little bouncy seat, Linda made a big salad for lunch, then went up to Gaby and Bryce’s room, carrying Aurora up with her. First Linda took a long hot bath with the lavender bath oil in their claw-foot tub—the kind of tub she and her mother had so happily gotten rid of in favor of a sleek sea-foam green one when she was in junior high. Then she rubbed Gaby’s thick body cream all over herself and put on one of Gaby’s thin cotton nightgowns. From the window, she could see into her own apartment across the yard. It looked oddly deserted from here, though Gaby kept filling it with plants and cut flowers and small framed pictures.

The room was messy—clothes scattered on the floor, half-empty coffee cups here and there, magazines and books left open. Yet the room seemed airy and clean. Maybe it was because of all the white in it, Linda decided. All of their linens were different shades of white. Linda had never considered how many variances of white there were; she had never considered white linens. Back home, she had floral sheets in light purple and green and yellow with a yellow bedspread. It all seemed so busy now, she thought, stretching out on the unmade bed.

She buried her face in Gaby’s pillow. As a child, she used to do this when her mother was at work, burrow into her pillow until she caught a whiff of her scent: a clean, almost starchy smell that Linda later realized was hair spray. Faintly now, she could detect the smell of the herbal shampoo Gaby used. It was comforting; that smell. It soothed Linda and she drifted off to sleep easily, the baby in her little seat snoring slightly. When she woke up, it was late afternoon; she could tell by the way the light slanted through the windows. The bouncy seat was empty, as if no baby had been there at all. Filled with nausea, she stumbled through the house, searching.

Foolishly, Linda called the baby’s name, running from room to room.

“Aurora! Aurora!” she yelled, her voice growing more frantic as each room revealed nothing.

In the kitchen, Linda clutched the counter, gagging with fear.
Hadn’t it been somewhere around here that a man had walked right into a home and taken a child? Hadn’t he murdered that child? Linda knew that anything was possible, that nothing was safe.

Through her panic the happy sound of a baby’s laughter floated toward her. Gulping air, she followed the sound to the back door, where, in the yard, Bryce was pushing Aurora in her little baby swing. The grill was lit, the table was set, and wine was chilling in the pottery wine bucket that Gaby had made. Linda leaned against the door, waiting for her terror to pass. She waited and she waited, but it had taken hold and did not want to let go.

Bryce grilled portobello mushrooms and served them with a rosemary aioli.

“I thought I should let you sleep,” he told Linda, handing her a plate of food. “Taking care of a baby all day takes its toll.”

She thought of all the things she could say, but said none of them.

When she’d gone back upstairs, she pulled on her own jeans and a black sweater of Gaby’s. She’d taken her own blue shirt, rolled it into a ball, and shoved it under their bed. Then she sprayed on too much of Gaby’s perfume, and put on her lipstick, Dubonnet, the color was called.

“You smell delicious,” Bryce had told her. “What is that?”

“Hey,” he said now, cupping her chin with his hand. “It’s okay that you fell asleep.”

“But the baby.”

“She was right beside you, Linda. Sitting there chewing on her toes. If she started to cry you would have woken up and taken care of her.” He took a few steps back as if to see her better from a distance. “Hey,” he said, “we trust you. We like you. Gaby wants to put your name in for sainthood.”

“Anything could have happened.”

“But nothing did.” Bryce stepped closer again, peering at her in that same way Gaby sometimes did. “You should always wear lipstick,” he said. “You look really lovely.”
Linda stumbled over a thank-you.

“You must be very used to getting compliments by now,” Bryce said, laughing. “Why so awkward with them?”

“It’s just . . .” She stopped herself. Let him think men like him did give her compliments every day, she decided. “You being married and all. To Gaby. It’s awkward,” she said, pleased with her reasoning.

“I only said you looked good with lipstick on,” Bryce said. “It’s not like I grabbed you and kissed you.”

Feeling ridiculous, Linda gulped at her wine and shooed at him with her hand, as if he were merely an annoying insect.

Later, after they’d eaten and Linda put Aurora to bed, Bryce asked her, “How old were you when your father . . . you know . . . did it.”

“Seven,” she said.

“How terrible.”

Linda nodded. Her father was just a blurry image to her, not so terrible really. She only had one clear memory, the two of them riding in his white Impala convertible with the top down, heading for Salisbury Beach in New Hampshire. And then later, after the beach, her throwing up on the ride home, the taste of french fries and cotton candy and her father’s hand on her neck, steadying her.

“Gaby’s mother did it when Gaby was in college. The old car running in the garage thing. We were just getting together then and I saw how it changed her. She doesn’t let go of things easily. I knew if we got married it would be forever. She wouldn’t end it. She couldn’t.”

He was quiet, waiting, Linda supposed, for Linda to tell him how her father had killed himself. But she couldn’t because he hadn’t killed himself, not exactly. He’d gotten sick—Hodgkin’s disease—and gone into the hospital and died a month later. There had been morphine at the end and her mother always told her they had made him comfortable; perhaps, she thought now, they’d helped his death along. Who knew?

“An overdose,” she said finally.

“Ah,” Bryce said, satisfied.
“Tell me about another boyfriend,” Alice demanded. They were walking down Twenty-fourth Street, Aurora asleep in the stroller.

“I did have one boyfriend who was famous. In a rock band.”

“Was it the Monkees? I love the Monkees. So does Dakota. She’s my best friend. After you,” Alice added.

“Not the Monkees, no. But a group just as famous. I don’t like to say their name because then people always want autographs and free records and things.”

Alice looked up at her. “Not me. I don’t want anything for free. Honest.”

They had stopped walking now and stood right in front of a record store. Linda searched the window for ideas, but she’d never heard of any of these groups. The truth was that this boy had been a drummer, studying at the Berklee School of Music in Boston and playing in a jazz band. It was the kind of jazz that hurt to listen to, and he would play long solos that made him sweat profusely. Afterward, they would go back to his apartment and smoke so much pot that Linda could not lift her arms or legs. The sex had felt intense, as if she were getting stung over and over.

“Please, Linda,” Alice said. “You can tell best friends everything. Like Dakota told me that her Daddy walks around naked all the time. Not just when he’s going into the hot tub, but even when he eats dinner.”

Linda’s head was full of fluff. She couldn’t think of anybody famous. Her drummer boyfriend would get so stoned he’d actually drool on her. “Are you a beatnik now?” her mother had asked, concerned, “Your clothes smell funny.” Eventually, Linda stopped going to his gigs, stopped smoking pot. Though she missed that stung feeling he gave her, she never really missed him.

“Aerosmith,” she blurted finally.

Alice frowned. “Oh,” she said, disappointed. “I never heard of them.”

“They’re very famous,” Linda said, moving again. “In Boston.”
Linda sat at the window in her apartment wearing Gaby’s shirt, watching Bryce and Gaby’s morning routine: him naked, the dividing of the newspaper, Gaby’s arrival with coffee, the beginning of their lovemaking. This was where she always turned away, made her own coffee and breakfast. But today she didn’t. She sat and watched, all of it. What did it feel like? she wondered. Was it like getting stung? Or something else? The history student had made her feel like she was melting, like hot wax dripping into a puddle.

She leaned over more to get a better view. Their bodies, naked together, were as beautiful as she’d imagined. Both of them were swimmers, taking time each day to go to the city pool. Linda watched as their muscles stretched, long and hard, toward each other. It was, she thought, as if they were in water now, performing a kind of ballet. When Gaby threw her head back, her fingers clutching Bryce’s shoulders, Linda saw from her new vantage point that Gaby’s eyes were opened. Gaby was looking right at her.

“Your daughter is adorable,” the woman in the ice cream shop said to Linda.

Linda watched Alice stand on tiptoe to reach the water fountain. “Yes,” she said. “But of course, I’m prejudiced.”

In the drawer of the table by her bed, Linda kept all the things she’d taken: a silver watch that no longer ran, two thin silver rings, the Dubonnet lipstick. Every week she took something else. She kept waiting for Gaby to say something. Not necessarily to accuse her; Linda would be surprised if she were accused. But to mention how absentminded she had become, or to wonder if Linda had seen her lipstick, her rings, out of place somewhere.

But Gaby said nothing. Perhaps she was always losing things in her piles and disorder, Linda thought, relieved.
Then one day, after Linda had relaxed and grown confident enough to take a pair of earrings that Gaby wore frequently, Gaby said to her as they ate their salads at the kitchen table, “Is that my lipstick you’re wearing?”

Linda stopped chewing and cleared her throat, unable to swallow or speak. Her head started to ache, a dull ache deep inside her brain.

“It’s just that I noticed we wore the same shade, and I can’t find mine anywhere. I thought maybe you picked it up thinking it was yours,” Gaby explained.

Linda shook her head.

“It’s no big deal,” Gaby said.

“I don’t think we do wear the same color,” Linda said finally. “Mine is Del Rio.”

Gaby looked confused. “Oh,” she said. “No. That’s not the same.” She chewed on her bottom lip. “They say lipstick looks different on everybody. Like perfume.”

Again, Linda froze. Just yesterday she had taken Gaby’s smaller travel size bottle of perfume.

“I like your scent,” Linda managed. “What is it?”

Gaby laughed nervously. “That’s funny,” she said. “I thought we wore the same perfume too.”

“Maybe we do,” Linda said.

“Number Five?” Gaby said, and Linda thought she was studying her a little too closely.

“How funny,” Linda said. “I wear Number Nineteen.” She smiled widely, enjoying the feel of her Dubonnet lips.

Was it her imagination, Linda wondered, or had Gaby grown cold toward her? There had not been a lunch time salad since that day Gaby had asked her about the lipstick, and Linda found that she missed those hours together. One afternoon she even made a salad and presented it to Gaby. But Gaby had apologized and begged off—too much work, that big...
consignment due. Linda had stood between their houses holding the large salad in one of Gaby’s bowls, unsure of what to do or where to go.

Linda began to wake with a start every night, finding herself alone and fully awake at 3 AM. Gaby’s house was dark; the entire street was dark.

One night, Linda put a coat on over Gaby’s shirt and went to sit in the backyard, hoping that the citrus and eucalyptus smells would soothe her. The yard looked different in the darkness like this, the paper lanterns mothlike in the moonlight. Sitting alone there, Linda thought hard about her mother; not her mother’s illness and death, but her life, their life. What was there really to reconcile? They had lived in the small house in Brookline together, eating TV dinners in front of the television. Her mother told her the Vietnam War was wrong, Richard Nixon was dishonest, smoking would kill a person for certain. All of those things were good and, Linda believed, true.

They read the same books, both crying over Marjorie Morningstar and, later, Love Story. Her mother was a practical woman—she lived frugally, traveled little, recycled. Still, she could cry over a Top Ten love song or a poem in Linda’s high school English book. Like Linda, she was a librarian, at an elementary school in Brookline, and she taught Linda to appreciate books of all kinds, encyclopedias and the OED. She taught her to understand the Dewey decimal system at a young age. She taught her when it was appropriate to lower her voice and when it was time to speak up.

These were all good things for a mother to give her daughter. So what was it Linda had missed? Hugs, she decided. Spontaneous giggles. Wasting an afternoon together. All of the things that Gaby gave her daughters. Without warning, Linda was overcome by sadness. Why, she could almost taste the tinniness of her Swanson’s Salisbury steak dinner, almost feel the scratchy sofa where she used to sit and watch Tom Brokaw’s face report to them each night. She stretched her head back to look up at the moon: it was waxing, something else her mother had taught her.
Would she really want it to be any different?

“I can’t believe you have insomnia too.”

Gaby’s voice cut through the night air, chilling Linda, forcing goose bumps to appear up her arms.

“I should have known,” Gaby said, sitting in the chair beside Linda. “Sometimes I think we are related. Have you realized it too? How much alike we are?”

Startled, Linda said, “No.” She thought they were completely unlike. “Do you really think so?”

“Absolutely. Our tastes are identical. And with your hair like that we could be sisters.” Gaby lowered her voice. “And Bryce told me about your father. Something like that creates a certain kind of bond, a certain sameness, don’t you think?”

Linda kept watching the sky. It seemed higher here, farther away. If there was a heaven, she had somehow moved away from it by coming here. Of course, her mother was not a religious person. She had been an agnostic, refusing to the end the Sacrament of the Sick or a visit from the hospital chaplain.

Gaby was looking up too, at her bedroom window. “I never got around to hanging curtains,” she said. Then she looked at Linda. “I’m a water sign. I bet you are too.”

“I don’t know,” Linda said. “I never paid much attention to that sort of thing.” Rubbish, her mother had called all of it—astrology, numerology. And Linda had agreed. But now she offered her birthday up to Gaby almost hopefully. “May 1. May Day.”

“No,” Gaby said. “That’s Taurus. An earth sign.” She seemed disappointed. “Bryce and I are both Aquarius.”

Their lovemaking, Linda thought, must feel like drowning. She’d had a lover who made her feel like she was riding the waves at Salisbury Beach, and she’d wanted to go deeper, to feel that overwhelming drowning feeling. But she never had. Linda started to tell Gaby that, but Gaby was standing already, stretching.

She wore just her white cotton nightgown. The cool air made her
nipples erect through the thin cloth, and the moonlight let Linda see the outline of her body clearly, her swimmer’s shoulders and sleek hips, the slight mound of her stomach. She was lovely, Linda thought, and as she thought it Gaby reached forward and embraced her. Linda closed her eyes, shaped herself into the hug.

“I’ll catch my death, won’t I?” Gaby said, stepping back.

Linda watched her make her way back into the house. Gaby, she realized, would never send her away.

She began to take larger, more important things. The big bottle of perfume. One of the nightgowns. Gaby’s favorite salad bowl. Linda placed them around her apartment as if they were really hers, as if she had earned them. Still, Gaby did not mention any of the missing items.

Linda slept soundly now. Yet, she woke each morning exhausted, her brain feeling like it was wrapped in gauze, her heart heavy. Now it was Linda refusing Gaby’s offer of lunch together, though later she felt an aching nostalgia for those afternoons in Gaby’s kitchen. She felt nostalgic for things she had not yet left—swinging Aurora in the playground’s baby swings, picking up Alice at Miss Winkle’s, her own little apartment above Gaby’s studio. Can you miss the things you still have, as much as those things you have lost? Yes, Linda realized, yes.

On a Thursday night that summer, after a dinner of grilled chicken with a peach glaze and fat, grilled peach halves, Linda sat beside Bryce as usual while Gaby went to put the children to bed.

“It’s funny,” she said, “having summer be cool. Back home it would be sweltering by now. Humid and hot.”

“The dog days,” Bryce said, nodding.

It was just around this time that her mother first got sick, calling Linda one evening to tell her in an even voice that the biopsy had shown a malignancy. Linda remembered how thick the air was that evening, how
the heat moved in ripples above the crowded sidewalk along Comm Ave. Her heels had stuck in the gooey tar when she’d crossed the street, trying to make her way to her mother’s side but moving slow and thick across the city.

Beside her, Bryce talked about why this city stayed so cool. He told her that if she drove even one hour north, to Napa, the thermometer would top one hundred degrees. His knee, bare under cargo shorts, was pressing against Linda’s own bare knee. She could feel the coarse blond hairs tickling her, the warmth of his tanned flesh.

Linda closed her eyes, remembered her mother’s trembling hand as she took Linda’s hand. “We’ll just take care of this as best we can and keep our fingers crossed,” she’d said. Her mother believed that was the best approach to all things in life.

That morning, Linda had watched them make love, and she was certain Gaby was searching for her out there. But Linda had not let herself be seen. Instead, she had stood, watching, waiting for that buzzing to seize her gut, yet somehow knowing it wouldn’t. Later, walking down Twenty-fourth Street with Alice and Aurora, the little girl had said, “I think you’re a liar. I asked Dakota’s Daddy about Aerosmith and I don’t think you know them. Dakota’s Daddy is a famous musician. For real.” No matter what else Linda said, Alice refused to talk to her. After a time, Linda stopped trying. She really was finished here. It was just a matter of being able to leave, of going back home.

Up close, Bryce was not really so attractive. He was just tanned and friendly and big.

The door squeaked open behind them.

Linda turned to Bryce. She took his face in her hands and kissed him hard and full. His mouth was soft and sweet from the peaches and the sauvignon blanc. A small moan escaped from him and he returned the kiss eagerly.

Linda tried to imagine what Gaby was doing on the stairs above them. She was glad that she could not see the betrayal on Gaby’s face, glad
that finally it was over and that she had done what needed to be done. It was the only thing left to do. Relieved, Linda stayed with the kiss as long as she had to, knowing that she could, finally, go.