

"Be kind," begged the rabbi, tottering as he wandered amid empty chairs. "Be merciful to an old man. Think of my poor child. Think of your father who loves you."

"He hates me, the son of a bitch, I hope he croaks."

In an explosion of silence the girl slobbered in fright.

"Aha," cried the wild-eyed rabbi, pointing a finger at God in heaven. "Murderer," he cried, aghast.

Moaning, father and daughter rushed into each other's arms, as the rabbi, wearing a massive, spike-laden headache, rushed down the coming stairs.

An hour later the elder Gans shut his eyes and expired.

DAPHNE MERKIN



Enchantment

I am reading aloud to my mother from Shakespeare's sonnets, trying to find one that would be appropriate to recite at her funeral.

My mother is not dying. She is a relatively robust woman, and looks younger than her sixty-three years, but she speaks of her death often and with a macabre glee. "When I am gone," she says, "I would like you to say of me that she never made mountains out of molehills." I am not sure why my mother considers this epitaph to be the highest form of tribute, and I cannot imagine that any of the mourners at her grave will understand it any better. But I know it is important to her, a link with the hearty, hiking-shoes atmosphere of her youth. "Fine," I say. Her implication, I suppose, is that all her children, finespun creatures, do just the opposite.

My mother and I are sitting on the bed in what I still think of as my room. I first shared it with two sisters, and it finally became my own during college. The room is adjacent to my mother's, and partly because of this I have had the greatest trouble leaving home. Whenever I had one of the fierce fights with her that have been a constant of our relationship ever since I can remember, I used to stand in front of her locked door and imagine my mother deep inside her bathroom, swallowing pills or reacting to my rancor by taking flight out of a window. "My mother is dead," I would think, composing the sentence formally in my head as though I were a character in a play. I saw myself freed and bereft at the same time, a figure of surpassing interest: *Who is that girl in black? I hear her mother died. So young? What a tragedy! I wonder how the children feel. They say it hit that one the hardest.* I would be watching myself being watched by others, wondering along with them what I was thinking. My imagination has always run to the vivid, although my mother is not the sort of woman to embrace personal drama. Sooner or later she always emerged from her bedroom, dry-eyed and stony.

The bed is narrow, penitential—as are all the beds my mother favors for her household. The wall I lean my back against is faintly, pleasantly cold. I note the undertow of gray that sweeps through my mother's vigilantly colored hair, and the loosened skin on her neck, beneath her strong jaw. Nothing—not these or other signs—convinces me of her mortality. The bed is tightly made up, with crisp white sheets and a slightly worn wool blanket. I was reminded of my bed in an instant when I read the description of Clarissa Dalloway's: It is the unyielding bed of someone who was meant to remain a virgin.

Now, in my own apartment, I have a double bed covered with delicately flowered sheets. Taking a great wanton leap forward, I originally ordered an even larger, queen-size bed, but when it arrived and was shoved against the wall by two surly deliverymen I immediately knew I was not up to it. I slept on top of the unwrapped mattress and box spring for a night; then I called up Bloomingdale's and told them I had made a terrible mistake, my bedroom was too small, would they please exchange the order?

Both the size of my bed and the style of linen were deliberate moves away from my mother's taste, and she sniffs at them with the same disapproval she shows toward the knickknacks that clutter my window shelves and coffee table. These knickknacks—a random assortment of pottery, small painted boxes, and the sort of oversize candles that are most often found in college-dorm rooms—are always dusty; one ceramic bowl is filled with honey drops that are so ancient and sticky they cannot be separated from one another. I apologize for these candies, making a joke of them whenever a visitor tries to dislodge one, but I have not removed them.

Over the years I have lost most of the things that have been important to me. I have a recurring dream in which all of these objects turn up again in a neat little pile: a leather-bound notebook, several watches, a stubby fountain pen with which I wrote a script full of flourishes, slips of paper on which I have scribbled crucial thoughts, a brown-and-white cashmere scarf that made me think of myself, briefly, as the mistress of an English country house. Because of, or in spite of, my tendency to lose things, I am the most intractable of hoarders. Every apartment I have lived in has become filled with magazines and slightly faulty appliances. It is a real effort of will for me to throw even used-up items out. I check the bottoms of cereal boxes for malingering flakes and dribble out the reluctant drops in milk cartons. I watch myself at these routines and recognize that they are important to me, a way of stopping up gaps. There is one tube of toothpaste that has been lying in my various medicine cabinets, untouched, for several years. The tube is cracked with age, and recently, when a friend volunteered to test it, the toothpaste squeezed out in a dried gob. "Throw it out," she said, not unreasonably.

"I might need it," I explained. "It could come in handy as a spare."

"Throw it out," she said.

I did not want her to think of me as visibly eccentric, so I threw it out. Later, after she left, I retrieved the tube from the wastebasket, and it now rests safely again on a shelf.

In the living room a clock chimes. "Hannah, have you done something to your hair?" my mother asks. "You look younger." My mother watches me for signs of bloom and decay, like a plant.

"Do I?" I say, and for a moment I feel as if our roles have been reversed—that I am old and in need of reassurance about my faded allure. "Let me see," I say, flipping through the pages of my fat college anthology, and begin reading a sonnet about cruelty. My mother stares out over my head, her eyes fixed. Her eyes are a deep-set gray-green, quite beautiful, and I sometimes pass along compliments other people have made about them. She receives such praise with a touching display of shyness.

"'Be wise as thou art cruel,' " I declaim; "'Do not press / My tongue-tied patience with too much disdain.' " I listen to my own voice as I read, trying to infuse it with the ripeness that I think Shakespeare would have liked.

My mother's affection has always been unreliable, subject to whim. One day, she sees fit to tell me that I shouldn't waste so much money on movies. "If you do everything now," she says, "what pleasures will be left to you when you are fifty?" The force of her illogicality holds me, even though I know there aren't a limited number of movies—of pleasures—in the world to use up and after that you are left twiddling your thumbs. Then, several days afterward, I call her late at night, in a sudden panic about my life. "I can't anymore," I say rather desperately, although there has been nothing terrible—no acute disappointment, no rift—to bring on this despair. "I can't go on," I repeat. "I don't see the point. I just want to do nothing. I want to lie on my bed for days. I can't always be trying to accomplish something. I *could* lie on my bed, couldn't I?"

My mother listens, or at least appears to, and this alone begins to soothe me: I want—have always wanted—her to listen to me forever. "It'll all be all right, Hannah," she says. "You'll see."

"And," I add out of the blue, as if this were the real sorrow, "I never have any clothes! I'm sick of having nothing to wear!"

"Don't worry," my mother says. "I will buy you everything."

Her answer imprints itself on my mind in capital letters: "I WILL BUY YOU EVERYTHING." The grandeur of it—the complete maternal-

ness—silences me. I want this moment to last. Never mind that it is entirely false, that this is being said to me by the same woman who is capable of reminding me that I owe her the five dollars she lent me for a taxi weeks ago. Does she know what she's saying? And how can she say such a protective thing and a day or two later, sure enough, announce, "The trouble with you is that you're spoiled. You think too much about yourself. If you had to sell in Woolworth's all day, you'd be better off." As a child, I interpreted such vacillations as cruelty (anything else would have required an insupportable detachment), and to this day I tend to care most deeply about people who can take or leave me. Such people, I've convinced myself, can be counted on in some way that precludes trust: they will never love you or stop loving you for yourself alone.

"That's it," my mother says, amused by my last selection. I go on reading, but pretty soon the poem meanders into universalisms and no longer applies to the specific darkness in her. I skim through a few others, trying to find one that will capture her fickle attention. "Here's one on the tyrant Time," I announce with pedantic fervor, and my mother is willing to listen, herself a great believer in the power of passing hours. When I am done she says, "He was a genius, wasn't he." Jealous of Shakespeare's momentary glory, I explain that the phrase "the expense of spirit in a waste of shame" refers to sexual intercourse. "I *knew* that," she says proudly, not one to be outwitted.

In one of my bookcases is a Lucite-framed photograph of my maternal grandfather, an Orthodox Jew, who was reading Thomas Mann's latest novel shortly before he died, in Jerusalem. His is the only photograph I have set out, and it is not entirely clear to me why I have chosen him from among my many relatives. People mistake his likeness for that of Sigmund Freud, who was a different sort altogether. But there is a definite resemblance, in the details, if not in the whole: the same neatly trimmed beard, narrow face, intelligent eyes behind round wire spectacles. The fact of my grandfather's reading a secular book rather than a religious one had to be kept a secret from some of his less broadminded friends in the

circle he belonged to. He was reputed to be a man to whom religious belief did not come easily. I suppose he is to be admired for having adhered to the laws in spite of this, and sometimes I wonder if the force of my grandfather's will lingers in me, and if I stray from it unnaturally.

My mother says that people of the same generation tend to look like each other, but I think she is pleased by her father's resemblance to Freud. She used to quote sardonic remarks she remembers her father making, but she has stopped of late, as though she suddenly wondered at the implications.

My friends, especially the ones I retain from years back, always ask about my mother if we haven't been in touch for a while. I could be an astronaut now, a wielder of influence, and still they ask, several minutes into long-distance conversations, "How are things with you and your mother?"

When I was much younger I would leave my mother in undrastic ways—for weekend stays at the homes of friends and cousins. In my family I was considered a great socialite because of these visits; my siblings rarely ventured out. I would invariably fall in love with the homes and mothers I was visiting, whatever form they took. What was important was that they weren't mine: I could start all over again in a living room in Queens with a mother who served fish croquettes on glazed blue plates.

One weekend stood out in my mind for a long time as being especially charmed. I was staying at the small and rather crowded apartment of some cousins. The girl, who was my age, didn't like her own mother very much, and there was, in fact, something irascible about this woman's attitude toward her children which wasn't that different from my mother's toward hers. Later on, I would learn that "moodiness," as it was called, ran in my mother's family. But then I saw only my cousin's advantages: her brothers were far gentler than mine, and there were no sisters to contend with. On Saturday night, after the father made the blessing over the plaited *havdalah* candle, signifying that Shabbes was over (all the families I visited were Orthodox ones, like mine), he drove us to an

Alexander's in a shopping center not far from their house. This was the sort of bland excursion my family never made, and it filled me with delight. I wandered through aisles filled with racks of clothing, staring at ordinary skirts and blouses as though I were seeing such things for the first time. I watched other families shopping on the brightly lit floor around me. "How do you like that, Daddy?" said one plump blond mother, holding up a brown suit. Something about her tone—or it may have been her windswept look—drew me, and I stood, staring, as her three children gathered around to study the effect of the suit propped against their father, the most nice-seeming of men. I tried to picture my mother calling my father "Daddy" or our family going out as a unit to shop at a department store. Soon after this episode—I imagine my aunt must have called up my mother and triumphantly informed her of my desire to come and live with them (my family was richer than most of our relatives, and we were seen in grudgingly glamorized terms)—my mother started referring to my "Orphan Annie act" whenever I went away for the weekend.

"Wish them good Shabbes," she said one Friday afternoon, standing in the front door in the usual way while I waited for the elevator, suitcase in hand. The clamor rising from behind her—Louisa, the maid, banging an oven shut in the kitchen, my brothers yelping at each other upstairs—was already beginning to seem like tender, lost music to me.

"Should I stay home?" I asked my mother tentatively.

"Don't be silly," my mother said, but I could tell she rather liked my doubts. "You'll be back tomorrow night, Sunday morning latest."

"Maybe I should just stay home," I said, offering my mother a chance to declare her affection, claim me, pull me inside with operatic attachment. Some of my friends had mothers who acted that way, clinging to their offspring like vines. But my mother wasn't cut from such stuff. She was German, not Eastern European, and I had deduced from remarks made by the Polish and Hungarian parents of my friends that *yekkes*, as people like my mother were called, were a fatally cold bunch—aberrant, more German than Jewish.

"Don't be silly," my mother repeated. "You're all packed." She leaned over to give me a kiss. Her muted-plaid robe smelled of perfume; I could never remember what it was called, because it was so unlikely—the name of an animal. "But do yourself a favor and don't play Orphan Annie there, O.K.? I know I'm a terrible mother, but no one else is interested."

I smiled, but I feared she was right. My longings would have to remain with me. It wasn't so much that they weren't recognized as that they seemed to be given mysteriously short shrift. The elevator cage groaned as it descended. While I chatted with Lucas, who worked the old-fashioned lever as if it were the tiller of a ship, it occurred to me once again—like a shadow I couldn't dodge—that I was stuck with what I had.

I suppose that for tenacious people like me the past is never really over: what you get left with is the tics of survival. I sit in a psychiatrist's office, where courtesy reigns, and begin my story once again. I can't separate out the feelings from the facts: My mother is the Wicked Witch, but she is also the object of desire. Someone—a nurse—once banged my head against a wall, and when I told my mother about it I remember noting, at an age when such perceptions feel less terrible than clear, that my mother's heart was not broken. But why, then, was I also made to feel special, my straight brown hair brushed by the same nurse into pigtails that were tied with bright ribbons? "Such shiny hair," my mother said. "It hangs like a curtain." My two sisters had more mediocre hair, and less attention was paid to grooming it. Years later, as soon as I could, I righted the balance: I began changing the color of my hair every six months or so to a brassy off-blond that was supposed to look, even in mid-December, as though it had got that way from the sun. And when the fashion for permanents presented itself I had the straightness of which my mother had been so proud stunned into frizzy little curls. My hair is no longer admirable, but no one recognizes me in photographs as the girl with pigtails anyway.

There are other photographs. I look at a photograph of myself as a child—a shiny, starting to yellow snapshot—and think, not for

the first time, *It all started here*. I am a big-bellied three-year-old, my floppy hair not yet made a fuss of but hacked into bangs that stop, most oddly, in the middle of my forehead. I am wearing a pair of boy's striped swimming trunks and I am looking up at my mother, who is holding another baby. It is summer and I have probably just returned from a trip to the beach. My mother rarely went along; my father "needed" her at home. My father worked throughout the summer—weekends, too—except for Shabbes. On Sundays, he worked at his desk in the study, in a leather chair that creaked whenever he leaned back. At some point, I stopped thinking of this hardworking man, with his constant supply of glasses of tea, as my father; he was simply the man whom my mother, for reasons incomprehensible to me, had chosen to marry. It was easier that way.

My childhood clings to me like wet paint. It is summer and I stand in a train station, having missed the last train I can catch out to my parents' summer house before Friday evening turns into the prescribed inactivity of Shabbes. I call my mother from an open pay phone; anyone can eavesdrop and draw the wrong conclusions. I am crying—I am always missing trains and I have never liked the summer. It makes me melancholy, even though I tan for long hours in the sun. When I pictured my life as an adult, it never resembled this: I sit on the beach and watch other people's families, all the pails and shovels, and the husbands standing, talking to other husbands.

The handle of the phone is sticky and I am threatening to become a prostitute. "I will," I say, "you'll see," although I am a bit old to begin and am not sure how I'd go about it, in any case. I try to envision sexual encounters with a stream of strangers, and I cry even harder. "All these rules," I say to my mother, "they're killing me. There's nothing holy about them." Crowds of sweating people rush by me to trains whose departures they have clocked exactly into their schedules. Nearby, a tall black man in a large-brimmed hat smiles.

"Don't be an idiot," my mother says on the other end of the

receiver. "Nothing's so terrible. You'll come out after Shabbos."

My tears stop abruptly. "Don't be an idiot" has worked its caustic charm. I have become a person consoled by only the breeziest form of solace.

An older couple, of an experimental persuasion—types I have met only since stepping out of my family orbit—invite me to a chic beach for the day. A man walks toward us along the shore and my eyes drop to below his belly, where there is no bathing suit. Groups of women sit on towels, breasts sloping downward, pubic mounds glistening in the sun. I chat gaily with my hosts. I am as shocked as my grandfather would have been had he been dropped into the scene from out of his tree-lined Jerusalem street, where hats are still tipped in greeting by the polite and deeply nostalgic German Jews who live in the area. What surprises me is not the streak of inhibition that marks me but that I don't entirely wish to rid myself of it. I remain clothed. My bathing suit is streamlined, daring in its way, the color of champagne in a glass. I have spent some time choosing it. I stand with one hand on my hip, watching. My hosts are having an argument. "I don't like your tone," he says. "I don't like the way you sound." She is as silenced by this as though he had punched her in the jaw. My parents yell at each other in argument, and my father is not one to comment on so abstract a grievance as my mother's tone. I think of their German accents, lending a slightly martial quality to everything that is said, and of the many bathrooms in the apartment in which I grew up—the vigilance about odors and uncovered flesh. One of my brothers liked to stalk around in his underpants, which never failed to infuriate my mother—as though at any moment he would go mad and expose all. "Put a dressing gown on immediately!" she would say.

On the beach, close by, a little girl plays with the wristwatch on her father's bronzed arm, twanging the strap, laughing when he grimaces as though in pain. He is sprawled in a rickety little chair; they are both naked.

It is evening on a winter Sunday and I am being driven back to the city. I do not know the people in the car with me, but I assume their lives are preferable to mine. We pass emptied motel pools and I imagine the guests inside, preparing themselves for dinner. One of the two men in the car, the driver, is a lawyer. He steers with great precision, as though he were applying for the role of "Driver" in a movie. I have never learned how to drive. Everyone excuses this by saying, "Of course, you grew up in the city." When I was young, we were driven to school by Willy. He was my other grandfather's—my father's father's—chauffeur, and my sisters and I used to take turns asking him what he had eaten for dinner the night before. At eight-fifteen every weekday morning, Willy's dinner menu seemed more important than the school day ahead. I was fascinated by the glass of milk that concluded all his meals. My second-oldest sister, Rachel, used to copy the way Willy pronounced his "s"s: "A big peesh of apple pie and a tall glash of milk," she'd say grandly.

My mother has learned to drive late in life, so there is a chance for me. When I am a passenger in her car, I point out oncoming cars and stop signs. She does not pay close enough attention, although she is very skilled at last-minute maneuvers. While she concentrates on twists in the road I watch her profile—the faint freckling of her skin, the straight line of her mouth, which makes me think of a child's drawing. I know her face by heart. Sometimes I think nothing will break her spell.