

My father always had a plan and this time it was place mats. Every thirty miles we stopped the car at a diner off the highway and showed his designs. My mother waited in the car while Cindy, Charly and I went inside. A motherless family, that looked better. We tried to look sad, yet responsible. Lonely but hopeful. These weren't place mats like anyone else's; he'd spent three months on the trivia, on the riddles, on the connect-the-dots that turned into Chile. This time he had a feeling.

We were moving now, to Pennsylvania, where there was nothing but corn and Quakers. We didn't want to move, leave New York, but my father's company, Arnot Envelopes, was relocating to Allentown. That's how he got paid, fixing envelope machines; but there was always a plan, not like the other ones, a plan that might deliver us, strike us rich, and move us to L.A.

Allentown. My father said it was named that because all the guys in town were named Allen. Allen O'Reilly, Allen Minkowitz, Allen Jubaruba. We took turns naming all the Allens who might live there. Then we got bored with that and started a game of License Plates. It was a '66 blue Comet and I sat in the back seat, on the hump, between Cindy and Charly, because I was the middle child and the skinniest.

I saw a California, a Connecticut, a Louisiana.

"Tenne-thee," said Cindy, who was nine. Someone at school had told her she looked like Cindy Brady, so now she wore her hair in blonde pigtails and spoke with a lisp. We all found her annoying; even my mother refused to humor her.

"Shut up," I said.

"I don't have to shut up if I don't want to. It's a free country, isn't it?"

"Stop it," said my mother. "Speak correctly." She was holding blue rosary beads and saying a decade as she always did on car trips.

We'd never had an accident, but you never knew when fate might catch up with you. There was the time her cousin Mary, the ex-nun, fell out on the highway. Her door was unlocked, it popped open, and she just fell on out there. A van ran over and cracked her ribs, killing her instantaneously. She was sleeping though, my mother added, always needing to soothe the truth, so maybe she didn't feel it as much.

The story got to me. Now in cars I did my own sort of praying. I couldn't stop checking the locks: my mother's lock, my father's lock, back and forth. I had to check them exactly the same number of times, or else one, the neglected one, would fall out. And it would all be my fault.

"What are you *doing*," said Charly. I'd been swiveling my head left and right, left and right, a private ritual I didn't think anyone would notice. "Cut it out, you're driving me crazy."

She made me lose count—which one had I looked at last? My mother or father? Which one would die?

"Alath-ka!" said Cindy. My father stared her down in the rearview mirror; none of us had ever actually seen an Alaska.

"Oh yeah, which one?" he said. "What color was it."

"Red," she said. "A big red car. It went that-a-way." She pointed in the opposite direction.

"Oh that's too bad," he said. "I guess the rest of us won't get to see it."

"Nope," she said. "Am I the winner?"

"Yeah," we all said, sick of this game too.

"So, whaddyou wanna play now," he said, looking at me.

"I don't know."

"O.K.," he said. "Say a guy—let's say his name is Skip Weaver—say Skip murdered someone on one side of the international date line then jumped over, real fast, to the other side where it was an hour earlier. Would his alibi hold?"

"No. Of course not," said my mother. "That doesn't make any sense."

"No? Whaddyou think?" He eyebrowed me in the rearview mirror.

"No—well it was complicated," I said. I leaned forward and thought a moment.

"You see Skip was in love with a woman named Lola, a nightclub singer—"

"What nightclub," he shot back.

"The Lucky Star. It was in Morocco. He loved her but—"

"O.K., Charlene, you have to finish."

"I don't want to play." Charly was staring out the window, twirling her hair. Since she'd turned sixteen she was always bored.

"You have to," I said.

"Why do we always have to play a game? Always. I'm sick of it. Sometimes a person just wants to think, you know?"

"He loved her," said Cindy, "but she was dying of . . . something really bad."

"No, you ruined it," I said. "She wasn't dying."

"Yeth she was."

"No, the problem was she belonged to a gangster named Micky. He was . . . a gunrunner in Morocco. She didn't love him — she loved Skip — but he ran a pool hall and wore a pinky ring and she had to go out with him."

It was June and we'd rented a house by a lake, in a town called Dix Hills. None of us wanted to go. We tried to get excited about a house, a lake, something new. It would be a fresh start, said my mother, who thought she might like trees and water. If we hate it we'll leave, said my father, lighthearted, as though it were just an adventure in the long life of adventures. Then there were the placemats — there would be less competition here than in New York, he said. Not as many restaurant chains, not as many creative guys. It would be a long summer.

Girls, girls, he was surrounded by them. He had no one to play baseball with, no one to light a fire. I was the closest thing — not quite-a-girl because I had imagination and collected sports cards: hockey, baseball, football. But even in my collecting I was a girl. I didn't care about RBIs or touchdowns; I cared about feelings. I kept the cards in shoe boxes, where the guys could all live together, in guy-apartments. They threw parties and were never lonely. Then I arranged the cards on my bed and imagined love affairs. Fran Tarkenton and me (not myself but an older, jauntier version) in Shanghai on a gondola. There was mystery, too — we were pursuing a killer named Rex all over China. There was time for love and time for suspense.

So, when we lived in Queens, he joined the Big Brothers and started adopting little boys, boys without fathers. He'd take them to the circus and buy them popcorn, to Mets games and stuff them with hot dogs. When they got too old — when they outgrew him — he traded them in for a new little boy. They always came over our house on Sunday, and ate too much ravioli, two pieces of chocolate cake. We

weren't allowed two pieces of cake; we were Catholic and had to learn the beauty of denial. They gulped down a big glass of chocolate milk that left a moustache above their lips. They took his spare quarters for pinball, never remembered his birthday.

It was always sad when they outgrew him.

"You're getting sick of me, aren't you, Billy?"

"No, Mr. Mullaney."

"Dave, call me Dave."

"Dave."

"C'mon, you can tell me. I can handle it. You're sick of me, aren't you?"

"No, I just wanna go out with my friends."

It was always the same—when they turned twelve, thirteen, they wanted to hang out in school yards, not see a double feature of "The Green Slime" and "The Thing With Two Heads" with my father.

So he'd get a new one and break him in.

"Timmy, what would it be like if you lived your life backwards, day by day getting younger until you were a baby, hmm?"

"Gee, I don't know, Mr. Mullaney." Timmy was only eight, skinny and had a voice like a little girl's.

"Dave, call me Dave."

"D-dave," as though he'd get in trouble. "I don't know."

"Well, what do you *think* it might be like, Timmy."

Timmy just shrugged.

"Don't you have any imagination, Timmy?"

That was always his complaint; they never had enough imagination.

It was a sad house by a sad lake. Even when we moved to the country we couldn't do it right. The walls were wrinkled, the floors creaked and sagged, the white kitchen light had moths and shoo flies buzzing round it. Pennsylvania bugs, we weren't used to them. In New York, bugs didn't fly. When they crawled they didn't seem so bad. Here they backed us up against the sink till my mother rescued us, took off her heel and smacked them. She smashed three bulbs that way. "I'm sick of these damn moths," she yelled at my father after the first week. She almost never yelled.

"It's not my fault," he said. "I didn't want to move here."

"Let's not start this," she said. He wanted to quit when his company announced the move, but she cajoled him, said we weren't going to be a family without a job. Said we had to think about the

future, about sending the girls to college, though Charly wanted to grow up to be a rich wife and Cindy, a soap opera star. He hung his head, sulked his hands, gave in.

Envelopes. Our house in Queens had been full of them. Envelopes of all kinds: manila, pink, note-size, letter-size. We never had a problem with mail. We could write anyone and know it would get there: Aunt Frances's thank you note, Mary, my ex-best friend who moved to California.

Now in the mornings he left at six-thirty, in a navy uniform, with a paper-bagged sandwich. He made a cup of instant coffee, poured right from the sink, before he left. You could tell he didn't want to go, his wrists hung limp and his face, gray. He drove to Allentown while the rest of us had nothing to do, no responsibilities. It was summer. There was no school, nothing to do all day but walk around. I was twelve, like a girl in a novel. Charly got a job selling hot dogs at a stand by the beach. I met her there every day, stood by the counter where the metal was hot and full of ketchup stains. It wasn't really a beach, just some sand they put around the lake to make it look real. Charly wore a white uniform and her hair up in bobby pins. She sweat only a little, and when her bangs flew in her face she wiped them casually, like a pretty summer girl.

Cindy burned in the sun and stayed home with my mother, who vacuumed twice a day. Cindy spent all day watching soap operas and pretending her Barbie dolls were lovers, illicit lovers, who twisted their heads when they kissed, the way they did on television. My mother started knitting a sweater for my father from a book she bought at Woolworth's, though even by August she wouldn't have it finished. I turned red-and-brown and blonde in the sun. After two weeks Charly had fallen in love with a lifeguard named Tony. When her shift was over she stood by his station, wrapped her legs around the tall white chair and shook her pony tail. He loved her too. He had muscley arms and slicked hair, and a gold cross that hung right next to his whistle. I would never meet anyone here, I thought. No friends, no one to talk to. But there was always the hope, when you were in the sun, that things might work out.

Before the place mats it was coupon clutches. He set up business with Uncle Joe from New Jersey, put machines in our basement in Queens and ran off hundreds of red coupon clutches, wallets with alphabetical listings by product. "A treat for every housewife—functional and elegant, too" was how they advertised it in the local paper. My uncle put up the money while my father was the creative

consultant. Cindy, Charly and I had to carry shoe boxes full of them every day, to sell in the school yard. Then we spent our afternoons after school stuffing the wallets with free cards — with pictures of Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman, with a joke card (What did the big flower say to the little flower? Hi bud.), with a coupon for five cents off Green Giant niblet corn. It was a bust. My uncle lost all his money, rolled up his sleeves till his mean elbows showed, and stopped talking to my father.

We spent a silent afternoon packing up all the coupon clutches in boxes, piling them in a corner of the cellar. "Well, it *was* a stupid idea," said Charly, then he smacked her and I started crying, then he smacked me too. We finished packing and then none of us ever mentioned that plan again.

Friday nights we couldn't eat meat, just grilled cheese or tuna casserole. My father came home from work, with greased hands, and a half gallon of chocolate and pistachio ice cream. He said it was a surprise, a Friday treat, but we always knew which flavors he'd bring home, they were his favorites. It was the best part of the summer, the best part of living in Allentown. He was never grouchy from work, just distant, his mind already in his workroom downstairs, readying his plans. He was drawing a new picture of a seal with a ball bouncing off its nose. His hands grabbed the food on his plate without even looking at it. "What was that?" he'd say, sometimes when he was finished. On days when my mother got creative, fettucine from a mix, she'd sulk when he didn't notice. Then they'd have a fight and we wouldn't have milk shakes before bed.

After dinner my mother set the bills and cancelled checks on the kitchen table, keeping notice of ones we'd paid and shaking her head over the figures, her eyes a glare in reading glasses. She was the rational one, the bookkeeper. Whenever my father got a bill in the mail his feet did a little scamper dance, as though he'd just seen a waterbug. "Hon-ey!" His fingers let go of the envelope as though it were on fire.

But she bored me then, she was so . . . literal. She couldn't make things up and she never lost control, not like my father. When she was upset she went and sat by the window with her rosary, then came back out, surer, with shoulders that weren't afraid of the world. My father was afraid of everything — of money, the woods, rude waiters. He always had feelings — too many of them — he couldn't shut them off. He stood by the formica, twitching, scooping up roasted peanuts till the can was empty. I never learned from him how

men were supposed to be; I thought they were the nicer ones.

Nights Charly climbed out our bedroom window to meet Tony at the beach.

"Don't tell Mommy, O.K.?" We shared a room and Cindy slept downstairs on the couch.

"I won't."

"Do you think he's cute?"

"You already asked me that."

"I know, but I just wanted to hear it again. Do you?"

"Yeah," I lied.

She always wore her swimsuit, I didn't know why, maybe they swam in the lake then made love rolling in sand. Maybe they licked the sand off each other's bodies. One night I snuck down to the lake and hid in the bushes that lined the road. There were seven or eight people—couples—sitting around a fire. One boy was playing the bongo drums, another a guitar. There was Charly, lying in between Tony's legs, her gold heart necklace blinking in the light. Purple halter and white shorts and legs... so clean and tan, right down to the ankle, with the rough spot that made it better. I could see why men fought wars, lost hearts and limbs for a leg like that. Tony was sick, lovesick. It was like a fever. He'd do a dance, he'd climb a trellis to be with her.

When Charly came home, at three or four, she peeled off her suit and in the light, the night light, she was the perfect girl, the girl everyone wanted, the girl I would never be. And she didn't even know it, just stared at her reflection in the fork at the dinner table, flipping her nose up and down, picking her chin.

"I hope we never have to leave here," she said, whispered, knowing I was awake or maybe just confessing to herself.

Charly said everyone in town laughed at him, going in and out of diners with his designs, wearing polka-dot ties and a bald spot. He's pathetic, she said. Everyone knows it, Mommy knows it too.

I didn't know it then. I remember being ashamed only of his tic, a honking noise he made when he was bored or distracted. "Your father," said Barbara Nelson. "He makes funny noises." All my childhood friends made fun of it, beeped their bicycle horns in imitation of it. He honked and then his eyes would twitch, but never in syncopation. I knew my mother loved him because she never flushed, just punched him when he went out of control, like during the homily at Mass. I wanted him to die when he did it. It brought up

every bad feeling I'd ever had, myself, my shame. We were clowns, we'd never fit in anywhere. We were frauds.

But pathetic, I couldn't believe it; he was my father. I was sure he had talent, it's just that it was free-floating, not anything you could pinpoint. He was a wasted vessel of talent and the world—the real world, not heaven or whatever was in the sky—would never hand him a paycheck, never clap him on the back.

Wildflower Trail, 2.5 miles. He got the map out and we tried to read it by flashlight. His safari hat kept tumbling over his eye; they didn't have his size in stock. We were lost and should have been home hours ago for dinner.

"Where do you think we are," he said, "here?" He pointed to the left side of the map.

"I don't know, what does the compass say?"

"I can't read these things—Northeast? Which way did we come from, North or South?"

"I don't know, I think South. Maybe."

"God," he said, and folded the map.

"Well, we're not really lost are we?" I said and laughed. "I mean, we're not going to be eaten by bears, are we," pretending not to mean it. I was supposed to feel safe with him but I didn't. He could fix televisions and broken fans, draw cartoons and design model buildings. It seemed that he knew everything, just that everything he knew was useless.

"I don't think so," he said, then, as we walked along by flashlight, swerving trees and forging a logic to our path by the moon or luck, "Don't be like me," he said. "Don't be like me."

We went on wilderness trails and got lost. We talked to the lake and looked at it; but it wasn't like the ocean, when we drove to Rockaway Beach and you could see out forever, all the way to England. We bought a compass, a bird-watching book, safari hats, binoculars. We didn't know what to do with ourselves, all this . . . nature. Just what could you do with nature? It sat there, you looked at it. I wanted to go home, to New York, and play stoop ball. I missed the feeling of bare feet on hot cement, of when you stepped on a tar spot by accident but it felt good, too good almost, and sticky. Playing the game where you walked in and out of the cracks, and seeing the specks of glass lit up like diamonds.

But we were here now and July was almost over, summer was half gone. I went down to the lake every day and met a girl named



Molly, with red hair. "Shall we be friends," she said. "Would you like to come over for tuna fish sandwiches?"

She had to mind her younger brother Biff, Biff with the freckled nose who rolled himself in towels to keep from burning. Yes, I said. She started teaching me how to do the backstroke, and how to hold my head underwater for forty seconds without dying. We'll have so much fun together, she said, and I thought, well maybe I will like it here.

Every Halloween in Queens we cleared out the cellar and made a little stage of cardboard. All the little kids on the block lined up to pay a quarter and see "Dave's Horror Show." Over the years we'd collected masks, good masks, with warts and big noses, with hair of silk. My mother wore a black gown and wig, and white powder on her face — she was Frankenstein's bride. My father was the combination emcee and Frankenstein. We turned out all the lights except for one spooky green one. There was a trap door on the floor of the cellar where Frankenstein kept his victims; my sisters and I would crawl out, with ketchup squirted over tattered bedsheets, with monster masks on. We were the Living Dead. All the kids screamed and said Put the lights on.

For the second act we were to dress up as a ghost, a ghoulish and a goblin. A ghost was easy; we got an old sheet from the linen closet and cut out slits for Cindy's pale eyes. A ghoulish was harder for Charly — but then we decided on a black cape and wig, and white chalk makeup. She looked ghoulish, like a grave robber. But a goblin — just what was it exactly? "It's kind of green," said Charly. "It's silver," said my mother, sure: yes, goblins were silver. "It's silver and it has dozens of arms and it flies through the air," said Cindy. What kind of costume was that? Kind-of-green sounded better. "A goblin is whatever you want it to be," said my father. So I made it my own, draped in gold, green and black, with a striped tail and six silver arms. It was my own goblin.

They lined up all day to get the best seats. For the quarter we gave them lemonade and black jelly beans.

Then he came home one day, without his uniform, with just a t-shirt and a carton of cigarettes. He slammed the screen door while my mother was frying fish sticks. It was August, a Friday. Cindy and I were playing Go Fish at the kitchen table, waiting for him to come home because we knew he'd bring ice cream, and then after the ice cream there'd be games, Charades, maybe, or Clue, where she would

be Miss Scarlet and I'd be Professor Plum. Or the game where he started a story and one of us would have to finish it. Games that would go on all night and never have to end.

"Don't get mad," he said to my mother. He sat down and started knocking the carton against the table.

"What. What did you do," not even a question.

"I quit."

"You quit?"

"Yeah." He kept knocking the carton. Cindy kicked me under the table and I kicked her back. My mother wouldn't say anything.

"Well?" he said.

"Well what? What do you want me to say?"

"I'm sorry," in a weak voice.

"What about the rest of us? Do you ever think of anyone but yourself, Dave?"

"Don't be mad. Honey, please don't be mad at me." He started to cry. My mother kept flipping the fish sticks, harder now, so that grease was flying all over the stove. I couldn't look at him like this, it was the worst kind of feeling, where life had no order and nothing was safe.

"What are we going to do," she said.

"I couldn't take it anymore. I'm not living to do that."

"What are we going to do," she said.

"Look, I'll find something. I've been thinking about working with little kids. Maybe the place mats will come through, I don't know."

I could see out the screen door to the lake, and I knew it was a stupid lake, and I felt foolish for thinking this would work out because nothing ever worked out, that was life. Lurching from one thing to another, that was life. There was never any ground beneath you.

Charly cried for three days, said she'd carve Tony's name on her wrist, said we could all go without her, she'd stay and become a waitress. Then Tony said, "Well, maybe my mother is right, we are kind-of young, why don't you go and we'll write every other week?" Every other week, I hate him, she said.

The days before we left, my father sat at the kitchen table with an atlas. My mother still wasn't speaking to him, but I knew that this time, too, if he sulked and suffered long enough, she'd forgive him. It was hot—too hot to stay inside and pack boxes—but my father fixed us pitchers of black cherry soda and iced coffee, mixed together. There was always another place to live in, he said. He drew lines on

the map in different colors, marking off the possibilities. There was Ohio and Virginia and New Jersey. On the map they all looked good. *20.*