

THE SISTERS
ANTIPODES

Also by JANE ALISON

The Love-Artist

The Marriage of the Sea

Natives and Exotics

JANE ALISON



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ANTIPODES



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In 1965, when I was four, my parents met another couple, got along well, and before long traded partners. This was in Canberra, where my father, an Australian diplomat, had just brought us home from a posting in Washington. The other couple were American but diplomats, too, finishing a post in Canberra before returning to the United States. Both men were in their early thirties, tall, slim, and ambitious; both women were smart and good-looking. Both couples had two little girls the same age and the younger girls shared a birthday and almost the same name. This was my counterpart, Jenny, and me. The two families had so much in common, people said: They must meet.

The couples fascinated each other at once, I am told, and for the next months we were together constantly for picnics, outings, dinners. My father's and Paul's cars raced from Canberra, and we parked in glades of eucalypts and spread out big plaid blankets. After lunch my sister and I and the other two girls would be sent to play, to find a koala or kangaroo, and we'd wander into the heat and buzzing stillness with sticks, hitting peeled trunks, prodding for snakes, as our parents murmured and laughed and lounged on blankets and clinked their beers or glasses of wine.

Later, I'd be put in a bath with Jenny. We had the same birthday, but she was a year older, and we looked alike enough to be sisters — little girls with wavy hair and bright staring eyes, although mine were blue and hers were brown. I see us in the bath gazing at each other over sudsy water, our wrinkled pink feet pressed together and pushing, as music and smoke drift under the door. We don't know that soon she'll live with my father and I'll live with hers, that for seven years we'll shadow each other around the globe, that the split will form everything about us: that we will grow up as each other's antipode.

The literal meaning of *antipodes*: two bodies pressed together, foot to foot.

In less than a year the split was done. My mother, sister, and I would follow Paul to Washington and my father would soon resume his diplomatic path with Helen and her girls: like continents splitting and sliding apart, each with its own living creatures. Pictures show the last hours Maggy and I spent with our father. The three of us pose by Lake Burley Griffin, where he kneels like a suitor and clasps one of us in each arm, earnest hope straining his thin face, while I cover my mouth and giggle. Then we left and flew to Washington. We didn't see or speak to him for seven years. Letters traveled over the oceans.

In 1973, we all landed on the same continent for the first time since the split. We were back in Washington, and the other family had been posted to New York, so Maggy and I could take the Amtrak north to see our father, and Patricia and Jenny could take it south to see theirs. Most often we went to my father's Upper East Side apartment when the girls were there. Jenny and I slept in two beds in her pink room; Maggy and Patricia, in her yellow room beside us. Daddy and Helen slept at the other end of the apartment in the master bedroom, which was silken and civilized and looked over Fifth Avenue with its leashed poodles and gated trees. Between that master bedroom and us ran a very long, narrow carpeted hallway through which you could pace silently, stealthy. Photos show its wallpaper patterned like a garden trellis, but I remember it as bamboo, a jungle, and am sure that outside the photos' frames the wallpaper twines and transforms.

One of the first nights at our deep end of the hall, Jenny and I lay side by side in the dark, hot after handstands and wrestling. Her window opened onto a sooty space between buildings, and faint sounds of cars and distant voices floated in, her radio playing between us. She was twelve, I was eleven.

When you were young and your heart was an open book ...

She sighed and stretched her arms, lifted a leg free of the sheets, and pointed her toes into the darkness. Then she turned to me and whispered, "So, who do you think did it first?"

Because this was the point. The split could not have been simultaneous and fair; things like that can't happen. One of our fathers had been ready to leave his own girls if he had to, and the other must have had less choice. One of our mothers had chosen a new man and won him, and the other woman must have lost. And whoever had won, whoever had lost, whoever had been easily left: That would determine who Jenny and I were, what each of us was worth.



Sometimes I think we all have embedded in the brain a personal place like a home we've lost that lingers in our skulls, and a pantheon of people who so imprinted us when we were young that we see everyone after in contrast. This place and these people — they're like elements or primary colors forming and haunting our lives. *She* was the original green, and this woman is like her but a touch more blue. *He* was first red, and this man is like him, but darker.

The original place I've lost is Australia. A gum's peeling bark, a kangaroo's tail as it belts into the trees, the screams of a kookaburra hacking the air — the original place isn't ideal, just primary, saturating your child sensibility like the first exposure of film; if that place is then lost it settles in the brain rare and fantastic. Australia inspires fantasy, anyway, the great southern continent having been imagined and sought by Europe for so long, and this one so weird when found. From miles out at sea as English ships drew near, I have read, even over the pounding Pacific surf the racket of birds in the new world was incredible. I wish I could hear it and see it as early sailors did, squinting dazed across the foam: a riot of birds, untouched and shrieking, so innocent they could be hit with a stone. Lorikeets, white cockatoos, galahs, rosellas; and in the waters, enormous oysters, mussels, cockle, giant stingrays to be seized. So much that was unknowing and, to Europe, unknown: *Terra Nullius*.

The animals and plants resisted categories: Marsupials, which don't lay eggs or give birth to live young but release occult fetuses into daylight. The platypus, a mammal that lays eggs and lives in water. Flying squirrels. Trees that shed not leaves but bark, can be swallowed in flames, but spring up green from charred stumps. Captain James Cook and Joseph Banks and the others moved through the new world like Shakespeare's Miranda, although unlike her they sought possibilities, reasons to plant a flag and lay claim. In New Zealand and Australia they gathered specimens: a small kangaroo they stuffed and mounted; flowers that looked like feathers or barnacles that they dried and dubbed names like *Banksia*; the skull of a Maori. After carving their ship's name on a eucalypt, they sailed back to the other side of the world, and two decades later British fleets returned with convicts, sheep, saplings, and seeds.

The Australia bobbing in my skull when I flew away at four is almost the one Cook and Banks saw. Climbing, squatting, poking, tasting, as a child you're close to the ground and all that wriggles on it, you can feel sensibility breathing everywhere, feel akin to small things: a gumnut, an echidna trembling in the grass. I still feel in my palm the papery bark of the eucalypt in front of our house, and how it peeled away, and the fairy gardens Maggy and I made, lying dreamy on our stomachs, arranging feathers and bottlebrush blossoms in the twisting roots of trees. And I see the garden made by our grandparents: Slight and white-maned in a cardigan, my grandfather Albert tends a philodendron as Maggy and I wander in nightgowns along pebble paths, among spiked palms, yellow wattle, blue gums. A place that came into being with each step you took through the shadows and sunlight, a place dangerously like paradise before we even knew the word.

When we flew away in 1966, we clutched things we'd been given to remember home: a stuffed kangaroo and koala, boomerangs, ink drawings of Aboriginal girls — the same things Cook and Banks took. We had books, too, so we wouldn't forget, the watercolor pictures conjuring a landscape of

banksias and kookaburras as animate as Arcadia. I didn't go back to Australia for twenty years, and that country seemed to disappear from the world and slip into my head. But the place pulled strongly as the mythical southern continent once had pulled those Englishmen two centuries earlier.

As for the pantheon: Maybe parents, brothers, sisters, are always the primary figures painted on your brain. The first examples of character — beauty or primness or a black comic bent — they sweep into archetype before your eyes, become the hues and tissue from which you'll be made or through which you'll see others. My mother and Helen, my father and Paul, my sister and Patricia; Jenny. It wasn't just their colorings that lit them inside my skull but their doublings. A bicameral group to match the bihemisphered world we traveled after the split, and the bilateral brain and bichambered heart that slowly grew inside.



How it was before the split, how the split actually happened: There are a few simple facts, photos, and the shards I remember, but mostly the fragments of stories my four parents have told. Some of what is given as fact is plain, but not all, and pictures are partial. The pieces of memory from when you're four are like spots on a dirty window rubbed clear enough for light, color, an image to show through. You can rub these places, hoping to see more in the murk, *willing* that lost time to reappear, but it won't. And you can listen to the stories, sift them for truth, but one thing I know is that for my four parents, the truths are not the same.

My mother has told me the oldest fragments, pieces of the story I was too young to remember. Although I look for cracks in what she's said to find traces of different stories the others would tell, I know that I can't peel her words from my vision. Still, what she's told me is more tinged with wistfulness or rue than with the dark poison I think the others fear.

My father and mother grew up in South Australia in families that had been settled there just a few generations. The first had sailed from the British Isles and Nova Scotia in the 1800s: a gold miner, a shearer, an apothecary, a grocer. No convicts: These people came to the new world as pioneers. I don't want to know about the earlier generations. When the lines are traced back to England or Scotland, the pursuit becomes dark, muddy, heavy with clouds. Instead I see those settlers stepping onto Australian shores like the first men and women stepping into the sun, and life and light begin.

I try to imagine those Anglo and Celtic settlers in Australia. How sharply etched they must have felt, their pale bodies standing alien against the alien landscape, casting different shadows in the new light, their thin pinkish skins stretched between their selves and the blistering sun. And what made those "selves": a language coursing in the blood; their names and the knowledge of where they'd come from; the ideas they'd brought of how things were done, how clothes were worn or a house was made or what green things should be pulled from the land, a land not yet packed with ancestral bones so alien the more alien; a way of regarding through squinting eyes that would have to grow fierce in sheer opposition to all that lay threatening beyond, the self in its skin being so slight.

They struggled with the ground at their feet, prying up stones, ringbarking trees. A great-great uncle named Tom, a bushman, slept in mud in the rain and stood waist deep in a stream from morning to night helping sheep through the water. A great-grandfather Richmond arrived in Glenelg as the town was just forming and wrote dry letters about the state of the sidewalks. These first comers were literate, resourceful. One wrote letters aboard the *Clifton* as he crossed the Atlantic and Indian oceans.

another published letters in the local paper, others wrote memoirs that glow with pride at each step closer to an anglicised world in the bush. A generation later, both my grandfathers were headmasters who looked out keenly as the place rose around them, annotating its progress. A great-aunt built her house from mallee roots and pulverized limestone and reported how grand was the day when a road came, then plumbing, and then electricity. The importance of the house, of making themselves *home*. My mother's mother, Dora, practiced shrewd domestic arts, reusing rinse water from the white laundry for the colors, keeping a cloth wet on the safe to chill milk. Whatever else their endeavors meant, these people transformed the foreign place to known, managed to make themselves home in it. My parents were the first to leave this new place, to look for something newer.

I have just five photographs of my parents together, along with a box of slides from the years of the marriage and a few pictures my father took of my mother while courting. The two met at university and my father's first photos of my mother reveal both how she looked and how he must have looked at her, and to me this is the magic current: the current that invests what is seen with value. She stands laughing on a wide, bare beach at the bottom of Australia, the sand white and the water cold blue, her bare legs shapely and slender and her most beautiful feature, together with her sparkling eyes. She played tennis and field hockey and golf; on my desk I have a round silver box she won in a putting contest and a silver pencil cup as runner-up. Her nose is strong and Mediterranean, although there's not such blood in our line, and her mouth can seem either bawdy and wide or a small prim plum; here lie her trickiness and potential. In photos of my mother and father they do not look well suited. In a newspaper picture at a party, his face seems alarmingly young and long, while beside him her eyes are lidded in a Cleopatra smile that seems knowing, although I doubt she knew much, was just restless and wanting to *go*, not sit potted at home. My father might have been restless, too — why else the diplomatic service? — but has always seemed concerned about propriety, how things are done. In the university library one evening, as the two were slipping on their jackets to leave, my mother tells me she saw that her gloves were dirty. She leaned toward him over the table and whispered, What'll it be? Dirty gloves or no gloves?

He considered a moment and said, Dirty gloves.

Courting, he gave her a silver brush and mirror and a pair of sunglasses with tiny shutters like jalousies instead of tinted lenses. I would love to have those, to see what you saw through them, what sort of shuttered world you could make. My father is color blind. His mother, Maisie, became truly blind and wore a glass eye; my mother's father, Herbert, was deaf. My sister has one blue eye, one green eye. My mother has webbing between several toes.

In college my father and mother were called, she tells me, the Gruesome Twosome. Both have always had a weakness for puns.

In the wedding pictures taken outside the Anglican church, a pert white flower sits in my father's lapel, his hair is neatly combed back, and he grins like an excited schoolboy. White satin cuts my mother into voluptuous triangles, a cap sprays a pale shower of veil, and her sidelong smile is dangerous. They sailed for his first posting soon after. On deck in the blazing sun, she waves at the place she's abandoning, the new world their forebears had only just begun making, while he clasps her by the green-silk waist as if she needs anchoring already.

Then my mother dances the cancan at the British Cricket Club, flings her skirts above her head, but otherwise works to be a diplomat's wife. She makes curries and scones, cuts her own dresses from batik prints, haplessly freezes lettuce for a tropical picnic, gives birth to Maggy, and wears a white

angel collar as she cradles her baby, her mouth the prim little plum. Then the young family moves to Canberra, home base, and I am born. Canberra was still fairly young for a city, and our house was a small bungalow in the hills, in a neighborhood being carved from the scrub, the trees and rocks around it ancient. I have one picture of my father holding me: A shadow falls upon his tilted face, and behind him spread the thin leaves of a bottlebrush or banksia. It's 1962.

At this point we move to Washington, and although my mother teaches, as she'd always done something about her in the pictures grows wild. She's not suited for the diplomatic service, it seems she's not happy. Her hair becomes tousled, and her expression, even her skin, seems darker. She wears sleeveless shifts that show her long limbs gleaming. As her hair grows, she looks less a new concoction of the 1950s, more a reckless girl.

In 1965, she suns in the garden in a green bikini with her head thrown back and the book she propped against her legs forgotten. I see my father pause at the window of our brick house and spy her — her legs liquid, face all light, troubling unsatisfied mouth sealed shut — and need to take the picture. The image appears in a sequence that begins with her as a slight figure in the green, then moves closer, snap by snap, until we stand above her as she sleeps, or thinks, or longs, or despairs, her eyes shut to the world and the sun. My father took many pictures in June and July 1965. Because she was beautiful and he wished to record her? There's no clue of what's to come. But she was going through a depression, she's told me, and did not seem made to be a diplomat's wife. In April he had written, *Dearest Rosemary, we are troubled not to have heard from you in so long.* She was the one who had abandoned home and sailed into glamour and peril. The morning after writing the letter, grandfather Herbert had a heart attack in the silence of his deafness, as he stood at the bathroom mirror, shaving.

What I remember: my grandmother Dora coming to stay soon after; standing with Maggy on the front walk and sucking a sweet blue popsicle; swinging in Candy Cane City; racing Maggy in slippers to new shoes until Maggy skidded into the staircase and split her head open, then the butterfly bandage on her forehead; eating toast buttered with Vegemite while my mother carried drinks to guests at a party; being bundled into a car in the dark as she cried, "We're packing up and leaving!" although she insists that this last is not true. I have no memory of my parents together, which may be why they look so unlikely a pair in those three slides and two photos, which an aunt showed me when I was twenty-three and first went back to Australia.

My husband and I sit in the dark in Germany and gaze at these images, cast upon a bedsheet we've hung over the kitchen's sliding glass doors. This story of my family: It's always felt like my most personal attribute, my worst and best secret, and whenever I meet anyone I might know awhile I need to tell it again. This story was the first I wrote, without even planning to. I was living in New Orleans trying to be an illustrator while writing grant proposals at Tulane for a living, but found myself on weekend walking to my office, turning on the computer, and trying to push this family out of my ribs all at once as a simple story. That story was too short; it barely began. So I tried turning it into more stories and then a novel, but failed; I tried writing that novel again and again, but each version could not tell this. So I let the octopus story sink into my ribs and wished it would dissolve there, still climbing into my throat. But it wouldn't, it doesn't, it keeps poking and pushing, and only now that the story seems to have ended can I try again to be free of it, even though my family will not welcome this.

In Germany, when I found the old slides in their metal box and brought them out to show my

husband, I was trying to push out the story a new way, by drawing. A color- pencil portrait of my mother as she sits upon a huge whelk on a beach, like a forsaken Venus, surrounded by palms and bottle-brush, the Southern Cross faint in the dark sky behind her. I wanted to draw her young, and to get her nose and mouth right I chose three of my father's 1965 slides and projected the images in the dark bedroom upon sheets of paper taped to the wall. Her slender olive arms, her bright batik dress, her hair, fell as colored light on my hands as I traced her.

With Alex, now, I click through the slides: Maggy laughing in a red snowsuit, me staring at ducks in the Reflecting Pool, my mother at night in that batik shift, and again in her green bikini. She glows on the bedsheet in our cold German kitchen, larger than we are, the sheet wavering in the window draft. We gaze up at her and sip our wine. But there's something else in the room as we look at her lit because you can't sit in the space formed by projector and bright image and not sense the man who took that picture, the man who would be standing with his camera where you now sit with your hand on the carousel. I almost see the current that ran from my father to her as he focused, the energy of her watching like the beam of light that makes her flare to life on the sheet: This stream of watching made what was watched *wanted*. I stare at my glowing mother, her beautiful legs, her neck stretched bare, and imagine my father looking at her even more intently than I do. And then I can only imagine, or fail to imagine, what made him turn away.

The slides spanning my parents' marriage are kept in a flat steel box the size of a board game, where they have been erratically placed in slots, half missing. All are numbered and labeled in my father's hand: *Rosemary*, *Rosemary and Maggy*, *Maggy and Jane*. In my mother's hand sometimes, upside down, are more descriptive titles like *Girls on swings* or *Girls in snow* or *Birthday party: before*. Among them is no *Edward*, just one or two *Edward and Maggy*. He took the slides that included him while my mother kept those of her; they divided the slides of Maggy and me.

The last slide in the box is the final shot of my mother in that marriage. I click to the end of the carousel, and there she is. She stands in her kitchen at night in a yellow swimsuit, hands fisted at hips, chin thrust up, eyes narrowed and smile wide and lurid. She looks Italian or Egyptian, and it seems lascivious to wear a swimsuit in the kitchen at night among half-empty bottles of wine and porcelain. Maybe she'd been dancing the cancan or Charleston, her feet bare on the gritty floor. This picture — not the one with the angel collar and Maggy, and not even the one in the garden, because there she was unconscious — this picture caught her live. But soon it was another part of her my father evidently did not want. It remained in the steel box after he'd taken what he wanted, snapped the clasps shut, moved on.

She wears a brilliant peacock patchwork robe over her swimsuit, shoved back by her fists. Dora had made the robe, sewed each bright piece to the backing with neat black stitches. My mother and I wondered recently what had become of this robe. On the phone, we disagreed about the color of the lining; she said it was red, I said it wasn't, until I said, "Well, I've got it in a picture, hold on."

She said, "Oh, you mean that one of me in my swimsuit vamping for Paul?"

So this picture, the last in the steel box, was taken not in Washington but a few months later in Canberra, one night when the four adults were together. It was not my father who took it, but Paul. And it may catch the first moment of interest, the first fissure before the split. Unless you ponder another small fact: that my parents first met Paul in Washington.

In 1965 we returned to Australia, where my father, I am told, was to switch to another department, for my mother. She, Dora, Maggy, and I traveled by train to San Francisco, where we boarded the *Oronsay*. My father flew from Washington shortly after.

As we steamed to Honolulu and Fiji, fashion shows and costume balls filled the time, and for one of these my mother put Maggy and me in a bath of hot cocoa to make our skin brown like South Pacific girls. Maggy was six and I was three. We slipped on grass skirts whose strands tasted bitter, had leis hung around our necks and hibiscus blossoms fixed to our ears and ankles, and went out hand in hand on the shining dance floor. But aside from that chocolate bath and the taste of the skirt, I remember little of this Pacific voyage and wish I did, wish I'd been older, because then I'd imagine it was the first time and I was Cook or Banks looking for the famous southern continent. I'd stand on deck and watch for albatross and see how the stars changed when we crossed the equator, and how the currents changed as well, and when my shadow crept to the other side of my feet, and when water began swirling the other way down the drain: when one pole lost its pull and the other strengthened. To be from the "antipodes" but to have lived on the other side of the world fixes home, the point of orientation, as perpetually elsewhere. The center is never where you are.

When the English first settled Australia, I wonder if it felt to those back home like a parallel world brimming with light while they slept in darkness, its greenery steaming when frost broke the soles of their boots: an eerie sense of otherness to which they were now yoked, a shadow self. You could stand at Land's End in Cornwall and stare into the Atlantic haze and know that if you sailed straight you could reach America. But to imagine Australia or New Zealand, you'd have to stare into the grass between your feet and picture someone far down there, staring into the dirt between her own feet, picturing someone like you.

The Maori skull Joseph Banks took back to England he had gotten for a pair of linen drawers, a weird trade — skinned head for empty bottoms — that seems to describe the relations between England and the antipodes: a cynical relation between a smart, old culture and one that's rough and unknowing, like Henry James's great "international theme," although for James the old culture was Europe but the new and naive was America; Australia and New Zealand didn't even come into the picture. But I wonder if it's part of the idea of antipodes that one of the two poles is more powerful because only one of the two has thought about, imagined, and sought out the other.

In Canberra we returned to the bungalow, which seemed small, even in memory, where houses often swell large. The eucalypt whose pale mottled bark came off in strips stood in the front yard, and at the bottom of the street was a rock where I remember sitting and waiting for my father to come home. Across from the house, a park called Rocky Knob rose up the hill and dropped down the other side with boulders jutting like dinosaur bones from the dusty grass, magpies shrieking in the cloudy sky.

I turned four in October and went to the Girls' Grammar, to a small shed of a classroom where we were colored and napped on mats. When the Queen Mum came to Canberra, the girls at the Grammar tumbled down the hill to wave at her in the motorcade, a plump woman beneath a blue feathered canopy. Among the girls who waved were the Stuarts, and I keep trying to see them for the first time. I remember a single moment, struggling with Jenny at the top of the hill, pushing her or being pushed down, but I don't remember when. One day they became relevant: *The Stuart girls are at the*

Grammar, too. Know them? Patricia and Jenny.

My parents met the Stuarts at a party they threw, and their parties were marvelous, my mother has told me, written up in Canberra social columns. This one featured white food, which sounds terrible, sounds German, but knowing the hostess as I have come to, I am sure it was supremely elegant. My parents followed with dinner at our house, another couple along as well.

Then evidently there was a third dinner with just the four, an evening that apparently went like a dream, the night it all must have begun, the first strands unraveling and entwining. The two new couples simply began forming: I see my father and Helen, my mother and Paul, one pair at this end of the table and one at the other, then one at the table and one in the living room, pulled apart and together by gentle currents, both new pairs murmuring and laughing, smoke curling under the bedroom door. It sounds so easy, so natural, these new combinations, everyone fascinated with the new other. It's a strange moment when you look at a new man's face the way you look at your husband's. Orientation shifts: vertigo. Desire you did not even know you had suddenly envelops you, its object within your grasp. All at once you imagine yourself happy, without having realized how unhappy you'd been. I picture the four the morning after that dinner, dreamy, their ears still humming with the timbre and cadences of the new man or new woman, then looking over the coffee cups to see if it's the wrong one there, and blinking, putting things back to rights.

From then on: outings, always together. *Whoever sees a kangaroo first wins!* We drove into the countryside, cigarette smoke flying out the window. Maggy and I stuck our heads out, too, and opened our mouths to the parching tart wind. In glades of gums, the sun bright and ground baking, when we had eaten our pasties on the hot wool blankets, one of those four might say to us, "Whoever finds a koala first — Whoever spots the first echidna—Whoever sees a kook."

And my mother would do her kookaburra laugh. She'd rock back on her haunches, shut her eyes, take a breath, and release from her throat a wild pulsing sound, a throbbing shriek that rose through the branches and thin dangling leaves and up into the ancient air, an animal noise that belonged with her platypus toes and made her part of Australia, primitive and wild, a noise that Helen might listen to with a smile, but one I doubt she would ever herself make.

My mother was beautiful, with her strong features and slim limbs, but Helen had a more glamorous, refined beauty. In a 1960s picture of Helen that came up by mistake when my father showed slides years later, a picture that took my breath away, she already possessed what she still has, a style of beauty that seems consciously composed. Recently, on a summer evening in Germany when she and my father had come to visit, she and I went for a walk while our husbands watched the World Cup, and the soft air, the feel of gliding forward in darkness, seemed to make us both transparent and open, to make us forget who we were. She told me how she and a girlfriend had traveled together to Europe when she was twenty or so. They sailed second class, but at night they would sneak up to the first class deck. Well, Jane, she said, laughing; we were good-looking, it was easy to be offered drinks.

She fell in love, she said, with Europe's cultivated beauty, its art. And her own beauty she surely knew how to deploy: how to smile just a little with the pretty teeth and Piero della Francesca lips, how to glance and glance away with the lovely blue eyes, how to reveal modestly her body's splendor.

Not long after that evening walk, as we washed our hands in a restaurant bathroom, she told me that I did not make good use of my beauty. I felt stupid when she said it, sloppy and wrecked beside her in the mirror, and it took two weeks to realize what I think she'd meant: not, as I'd thought, that I was dressed badly and had no idea what to do with my hair. But that I did not use my looks to get ahead.

It's awfully superficial, Jane, I know, she'd said, reaching for a towel as she glanced at my reflection with those blue eyes. But these things end up mattering in our world.

My stepfather, her first husband, said to me once, Now there's a woman who's never lost her look. He narrowed his eyes and almost whistled between his teeth, and I think he was seeing his first wife again, through those forty years since Canberra, since the day he left her, or she left him, or they left each other.

After the eucalypt picnics we'd go back to the Stuarts' house or ours. The four girls would be bathed, Jenny and me pushing at each other's wet pink feet, and then we'd be tucked into bed together. On the other side of the door, Paul and Helen and my mother and father would drink, play music, laugh. At some point they'd come in to kiss us goodnight. I don't know if only our respective parents kissed each of us, or if the others did, too, to be fair — if each of them sat a moment in the dark bedroom, in the quiet, away from the smoke and music and others, and rested a hand lightly on the wrong girl's stomach, and indulged in a private glimpse of a future.

There was a weekend, my mother's told me, when we all drove down to the beach near Canberra and stayed together in a cottage. Another weekend the four adults went to Sydney and checked into a hotel, perhaps with not quite their right names. These points I've been told as facts, uninflected. But everything else bends when I try to get an idea of who did what when. My mother says she heard Helen say to another woman at a party, *There's a man at this party and his name is Edward Cummins and he's mine, so hands off*. Paul says that my father and Helen had a motto: *Screw your courage to the sticking point*. Which might have meant, as he believed, that they were already at it, but might have meant they weren't; they were waiting. My father became furious one night twenty years later and kept saying, *What she did on the bloody ship!* — meaning my mother set the split in motion even before reaching Canberra, perhaps even in Washington. And Helen has said, *Jane, you must understand: I had to get my girls away from Paul*.

I wish I could remember what my mother and Paul said to each other if I slept in the back of his car or what my father and Helen whispered to each other if I tagged behind on a walk, anything I might have heard or seen, so that I could *know* something, be certain. If nothing more decisive had happened if the four adults had just dallied and parted, Paul and Helen and Patricia and Jenny would never have remained in my mind, so little trace did they leave.

What traces remain: the tangy hot air as I held my head out of the car window searching for kangaroos and koalas; the lights flashing on as my mother pulled Maggy and me from bed and rushed us outside. And my father as he sat on the edge of my bed with a cigarette and drew glowing orange pictures in the dark, bright circles and swirls like silent fireworks that lingered in the darkness and then slowly dissolved, but lingered still in my eyes after he'd kissed me goodnight, got up, and shut the door.

My sister and I each have copies of the two pictures that record our last day with him. On the back of both of mine he has printed *To Janey with love from Daddy. August 1966*, and this is the start of his transmogrification into photographs and writing. In one photo, the three of us pose beside Lake Burley Griffin, my father kneeling between Maggy and me. I'm in a green-and-red-striped dress with trumpeters on the pockets; my sister's in dark corduroy, black tights, a head-band; my father wears a fawn sweater with a tie knotted inside. The wintry August sky is clear, pale blue, and all three of us look hopeful. We look like brave pioneers setting off into a new world. In the other picture, we pose

on the verandah of a colonial house, and I giggle and press my hand to my mouth. Probably he pointed out something funny to make us smile. Soon after, he disappeared.

I can't offer a story to prove I loved him. Love describes a relation between one and another and is only possible when the distinction between yourself and the other is clear, when there's distance. Perhaps if you're too young, love isn't relevant. The other is simply crucial, like your own skin, your bones.

Sometime before Maggy and I left Australia came the presents from grandparents and friends: the iron washes of Aboriginal girls, the stuffed kangaroo and koala with black rubber claws, wooden boomerangs to hang on a wall. There was a night in a hotel or at a friend's when my mother dressed up and I'm guessing she was applying for our U.S. visas, although for a long time I understood it as the night she married Paul. But they didn't marry until later, after we'd lived in Washington almost a year.

The splitting had happened in less than nine months. But posts are limited, and Paul's in Canberra was about to end, taking him and his family back over the Pacific. Surely the four had needed to move quickly. Their ability to imagine a new world and step into it dazzles me; they were just thirty-one, thirty-two. And how to resist the miraculous neatness? No one would be left out.

But surely everyone was stunned. The adults, for having done something so astonishing so fast — those years divorce wasn't common, and these divorces were entwined with the men's professional lives and their roles representing countries. And the four girls were stunned, but the way children are in a quiet, numb shock, like a crack in a stone, not enough to split it but inside, silently fissuring.



This time we crossed the Pacific by plane, at night, as if in stealth, and as if already the world had grown cold and new, the romantic day of ocean liners gone. Paul had flown earlier and shipped some of our things — dishes, wicker, batik spreads — but until we followed him it apparently wasn't certain that he and my mother would proceed. He talked to her on the phone from Washington and told her she should wait. But she didn't want to wait. She and my father had already divorced, and what could she do now? She applied for a new passport for the three of us, as we could no longer use what we had with my father. In this passport we're still called Cummins, and in the group photo my mother's head is tilted, eyes heavily lidded. Maggy stands beside her, alert and troubled, mouth soft. I sit on my mother's lap with her Bellini hand clasping my stomach and grin like a monkey, clueless.

We flew back over our ocean path from Sydney to Honolulu and landed in Los Angeles, where Paul's mother took us to stay in her white bungalow. She and my mother hadn't met, so this surely was awkward — this brand-new woman, not even a wife, and her unknown daughters — all sudden replacements. My mother called Paul in Washington and insisted he fly out, which he did, but when the two went to dinner they fought, my mother says, and she walked home alone. (Why did they fight? "Oh, just because I went to the French ball after he'd left Canberra. With friends, *mutual* friends of ours.") Not a good start to this new world. But we were there, and how would she support two daughters alone? We flew on to Washington and rented a stone house on Connecticut Avenue, a cold, drafty, leaky house with spiders in the corners, and tried to start new.

Over the next seven years, each couple would establish itself, and each girl would take form. We would live in Washington for three years, first in the uneasy stone house and then a brick one; we'd move to Los Angeles while Paul got a second degree; we'd go on foreign post in South America. My father and his new family would have postings in Asia and the Middle East, so the two families were always on opposite sides of the globe, once a neat 180° apart.

Maggy and Patricia were seven when this new era began, young, but maybe formed enough to have their own soft shapes already, a thin bark. Jenny and I were five and four, just starting, and over those eerie, detached years I think we formed ourselves around the primary facts of the split. I picture cells dividing and subdividing and see us each looking out from within a thin membrane, gathering knowledge and hoarding it, acquiring longings and manners and peculiarities that would become our personal traits. Hurrying this stuff inside, then pushing out layer upon layer of gelatinous skin to keep all of it safe, to keep other things out. Like an oyster wrapping nacreous film around grit, like a tree forming rings of tissue.

When I'd pulled papery strips from the eucalypt by our house in Canberra, it didn't bother the tree. Beneath the bark lay cool blue-white beluga skin, and if you pressed your cheek against it, its tension told you it was alive. In Washington the oaks didn't have smooth skin but ridged crocodile bark that could make your knuckles bleed. But jam a rock into the bark or reach up and snap a green twig, and it bled, too.

In a Miami garden I once saw a slim tropical tree into which someone had stabbed a spade when I was young. The sapling hadn't been mortally hurt, though, it had kept growing, layering tissues and xylem and phloem around the blade, so that the tree's smooth flesh had closed around the spade at its knees, until only the wooden handle showed. I was in my twenties when I saw this, and it reminded me of paintings of saints: a woman standing, head bowed and serene, with the sword that had killed her mortal self piercing her ribs; another with the ax that had severed her head from her trunk lodged lovingly in her neck, rimmed with a demure line of blood. Saints and their attributes, a complicated symbiosis, the saints held forever in the moment that cleaved them from mortal life and gave them life eternal. The saints don't actually caress the sword, ax, or rock, just live with it deeply. That's what the Coconut Grove tree looked like, with its flesh enveloping the spade. It needed that spade now; you could not draw it out. It's how I grew up, and how I imagine Jenny did, too, with our parents' split at our core, our tissues growing around it, around the fact that we'd each been replaced.

I wonder sometimes how our lives would have been if the conditions had been more enlightened and less international: if instead of oceans and half a globe between us, there'd been only a park and a few streets, so we could see our counterparts on weekends, and they hadn't become so fantastic. Or if those four parents had been more modern, versed in psychology, and, worrying about the effects of their rearrangement, had made enormous efforts to heal the little rips.

As I write this, though, I know I prefer how it was done. I like the austerity, the extremity. It gave us, or I know it gave me, a secret, black, precious possession, like when you split open a geode and find the sharp crystals inside. For seven years we may have seemed like ordinary girls kicking balls and learning to write and getting our hair cut and skinning our shins. But inside was crystallizing a mass of fantasy, jealousy, and longing that was crucial and would define us.

These things happen: A father vanishes overnight and turns into paper. Another man appears, his face rough and smelling of cigarettes and scotch when we kiss him, but he's not ours, this is understood, he belongs to a pair of girls somewhere else. Our own identity — as fixed by name, father, nationality — is as curiously cloudy as the cigarette smoke that drifts around him when he sits on the sofa or drives fast through Rock Creek Park. And this problem of identity begins to fix on the facts not only that our own father has left us, but that we each have a double, a girl we cannot see but this nonfather sees each time he looks at us. He sees through our eyes straight to her.

Paul had a sixties style, dark hair, Beatle boots. He was tall, walked with a swagger, and had eyes so dark they seemed almost without pupils, and a mouth that in pictures looks as soft as Paul McCartney's, but wasn't. He parted his thin hair to the side, and even then it receded from his forehead, which was tanned from tennis and lined from raising his brows in disbelief, from not giving a good goddamn about something as insignificant as the sun. He smoked and drank steadily but never seemed to alter; his own father had left when he was a boy; he believed in picking yourself up by the bootstraps. He had a fast, gunshot laugh.

Brought from his first life and now in that leaky Connecticut Avenue house: a low-slung black leather Mies van der Rohe chair; a tough leather table from Peru; a carved whale's tooth, cold and heavy in my hands, with a gleaming dark mother-of-pearl where the tooth had been rooted in the whale's jaw. Also the double bed he had shared with Helen, where he now slept with my mother, and that would later be given to me. Paul drove an old smoke-gray Jaguar and had a large framed photograph of a snarling tiger taken so close you could see each strand of fur, the gleam of saliva on

its fangs, the black pupils in its wild green eyes. At dinner I'd stare into those mad, slanting eyes, and ~~this tiger, the Jaguar, the leather chair and table, the whale's tooth: All these things configured Paul~~. This jungle would grow when we moved to his mother's house in L.A. and then on to South America: the saber-toothed tiger trapped in the tar pit, its kin who ranged over the isthmus of Panama and killed off the old, gentle sloths, the wild German shepherd Paul got to protect us but whose nails left bloody lines in our legs — and the sharks, all the gray sharks I have never in life seen but that glide every month through my dreams.

I don't remember thinking about Paul when we first moved into that cold stone house, just being conscious of him as a large living fact, a figure whose dark form took up space. And not just his form but his low voice, his whistle, the smoke gusting from his nose. I sat in that windy living room, staring out at cars and buses and worrying to the point of panic about not being able *not* to think, about the fact that there was always something in my head, like choking: numbers, pictures, words, even if they were just *Don't think don't think don't think*. So I had room in there for thinking. Just not about a man like Paul, or about the shock of what had happened.

He went downtown each day to the State Department, and Maggy and I walked down Connecticut to Murch Elementary, Maggy to second grade and me to kindergarten. We still called ourselves Cummins, we still were Australian, we still had bright little Aussie accents. Cars and buses rushed down the wrong side of the street, and it was autumn when in Canberra it had been spring; the world felt mirrored, unreal. There was a spell that first year when in bed at night I'd watch lights careen through my window, dance up the wall to the ceiling, then race down the other wall whenever a car passed. I'd stare at them without blinking, stare at one dancing cluster of lights after another, and try to be hypnotized. But at a certain moment I'd begin to tremble, then cry, then shake with sobs, pillows jammed in my face until it was slimy. I'd turn it over and go to sleep and every night dream the same dream: of flying back to my father. Through the airplane's window I'd peer through Canberra's marbled clouds and see him tiny and far on the tarmac. His figure would grow as the plane descended until we landed, the hatch swung open, and I jumped into his arms and clung like a monkey, at which point the dream stopped, because what on earth could happen next?

After this came a time when it seemed I was never awake but suspended, dreaming, in ice or glass. A sense of being off-kilter: Home, the real center, was far away, and the feel of hovering at an edge was sickening. I did what people said to do, pinched my arm hard, but a pinch in a dream felt like a real one, so there didn't seem to be any point.

How do you make your self home? Are *people* your home? Does loving or needing someone make him home for you? A feeling that's gravitational: Wherever he is, is home. The one toward whom you helplessly gravitate and near whom you feel settled, that painful yearning dissolved. When you're a child, surely your parents are home. Fathers and fatherlands, the sun. A basic sense of orientation, or knowing where the sun is.

My father stayed in Canberra for some months after we left, and then he was posted in Asia. By the time both divorces were settled, and Helen and my father married, as did my mother and Paul, as if the space had blasted apart stones and fused the pieces, making metamorphic families.

Over the next years letters flew between Paul and his girls and between Daddy and us; letters even between us and the girls, although I forgot about these until finding them years later in a box in my

mother's basement. First, when I was too young to write, I drew my father pictures: little girls in long bright dresses, small boys falling from trees. My mother wrote for me once, but apparently it was made clear that a letter in her hand was unwelcome; only the men, of the four adults, were to communicate. Maggy and I didn't talk to our father on the phone those seven years, and I do not know why: because it was expensive and no one made such calls in those days, or no one thought of it, maybe because a live line between the two households seemed dangerous, fire.

Our father wrote us together, *Dear Maggy and Jane*, Maggy first presumably because she was older and it must have been hard for him to decide what to say. He described exotic places, local customs and shows. *Some of the riders looked like the Saracens who fought against the Crusaders (have you read about them?) with turbans and cloaks that streamed behind them when the horses galloped ...* He made observations about the time of year and what we might be up to: *I suppose you've had lots of snow and fun with your sled and snow saucer. Is that what it's called?* The other girls are always present: *I know how quickly Patricia and Jenny are changing now and I expect you are too ... The next birthdays are yours Jane and Jenny's too on the same day.* He signed with variations of *I think of you often and love you. Your Father.* Below this he'd print a double row of X's: at first five X's, until after a few letters he settled on three but matched it with a double row of three O's. A birthday card to just one of us would have a single row of X's and O's.

He sent presents for birthdays and Christmas, fabulous things from Asia that would appear in the front hall wrapped in battered brown paper and smelling dry and foreign. Inside: a little leather pouch containing tiny ivory tigers and birds; an intricately wrought silver elephant that looked seamless but split neatly apart in your hands; a fine silver pin in the shape of a peacock with tiny whorling filigree feathers; a heavy wooden jewelry box to put the peacock in, one box for Maggy, one for me. The wood was dark and glossy, as dense as gold, and inlaid with brass scrolls and arabesques that on the curved lid surrounded our names, *Margaret, Jane.* The box opened with a small brass key, and inside sat a shelf trimmed in red velvet, which you could lift to reveal a lower, secret layer. I carried this heavy treasure, the silver peacock, and the plump silver elephant to Show and Tell, then installed them on my dresser. They were proof, proof that was splendid but hurt.

The letters often came the same day: one for Paul, one for us, nothing for my mother. Paul would take the letter from his girls and read it in private with a scotch; Maggy and I read ours from our father together in one of our bedrooms. We called our father Daddy in our letters but didn't say the word much. The girls also called our father Daddy, while their own father they called Father. We called their father Paul. The girls were called the girls, or Paul's girls, his real girls.

The parallels between the two families were so neat we seemed as designed as nature, twin markings on the wings of a moth. My father's birthday came about a week before Paul's, so Maggy and I wrote cards for both men together. My mother's birthday fell two weeks before Helen's; Jenny's birthday was the same as my own. In April 1968, two years after the split, my father and Helen had a baby boy, and four days later, so did my mother and Paul. Nicholas and Tommy: two babies that consolidated the new marriages and knotted us tighter. Tommy bound Maggy and me by blood to Paul and the girls, and bound the girls to our mother; Nicholas bound us even more to the girls as well as Helen, and bound the girls to Daddy. Like paper dolls all holding hands.

Something else we shared with the girls: grandparents. What the old people thought of the

rearrangement I don't know; they seemed to accept it, stalwart. The girls' grandmother was Elsie, ~~petite woman with a face like an elderly movie star, a smoker's dry voice, long thin fingers, a husky~~ laugh, and a very old cat named Shadow, who could open the kitchen door. Her manner was gentle and when we told her something she enjoyed she'd open her eyes wide and say, "Oh, *my-y-y*," then shake lightly with a papery laugh. If she resented that we'd displaced her real granddaughters, she never let Maggy and me know. Every birthday and Christmas she'd send a card and check for \$10, and during the year we lived in her house in L.A., she never let us think we were anything but her own. How did those girls feel, knowing we were in their grandmother's house, leaning against her knee getting her birthday checks, earning her laughter?

Probably how we felt knowing they now had our Maisie and Albert. Our grandparents had begun writing us at once after the split, sweet, passionate letters that began *Darling Janie, My dearest Janie, Oh! Janie!* They'd each write a part, and Maisie would sign, *all my love — lovingly!* and beneath that squeeze as many *X*'s and *O*'s as could fit in the last sliver of paper, wild squashed *X*'s that turned corners and jammed into words, like she was kissing you all over your face.

Albert and Maisie traveled to Asia and sent us cheery postcards reporting their adventures with rickshaws and spices and giving news of our father, without mentioning those other girls in his house they must have known children can get sick with jealousy. When we read these postcards, we'd never have imagined them with those girls, not realized our grandparents had made the trip in order to meet and start loving them. But at the same time our father wrote that he and Helen looked forward to having his parents stay with the girls, while he and she got away on their own, and reading this letter even now I'm jealous. My mother tells me that Albert wrote her, too, saying they'd met their new daughter-in-law and liked her very much: how this had stung. I can't but wonder if they were instructed to do this, if those two old people sat at the kitchen table in their bluestone villa in South Australia pondering the matter, wading anxiously in the ocean of difficult protocol into which they suddenly been cast. *Marriage*, Albert wrote me years later in his watery blue hand, *is meant to last a lifetime.*

The absent presence of the other family was never mentioned but always felt, a sense of otherness elsewhere to which we were bound. The sun wasn't over us just now because it was over them. Or a sense of all of us holding our breath, and maybe the arrangement might work. It had to: Everything was fair and right, because everything was even. It was fair that there was a Jenny somewhere who had my birthday and father and grandparents and half brothers, because, after all, I had hers. The letter she sent me, which I found recently in a plastic pouch labeled *Friends*, tell of horses, judo lessons, swim meets, new clothes. Her writing is pretty and plump, with little hearts for *O*'s, and she signs off *love you and miss you very much!* I expect I wrote the same things to her and signed off that way, too.

It seems strange, though, when we could hardly remember each other, and impossible that we could miss each other when we'd parted ways at four and five and the circumstances were rough. Even more unlikely when I think of how it would be when we'd meet again: how we'd look at each other in Jenny's pink bedroom and see only the girl who'd taken everything. So I wonder how these letters began, whose idea they were. No one on our side seemed up to that sort of decorum. Maybe the wish was to turn us into friendly pen pals, little paired animals of a zoo or an ark, cheery written proof that the enterprise was working. Surely the hope, anyway, was that the arrangement would be fine, that the four adults could brush hands clean and smile and shake and say, "See, then, no harm done!"

I went to first grade, then second; we moved to a house on Barnaby Street, where we'd return when we was eleven and where most of my dreams are still staged. A half-timbered brick house, fairy-tale gothic, giant oaks along the sidewalk, shaggy firs at either side, a concrete path leading through grass limp and silky as hair. Pink azaleas grew beneath the front windows among tangled ivy, ferns, and fuchsia; silver slugs; daddy longlegs waited on the front steps and trash cans, waited to run up your legs and arms.

By the time we reached Barnaby my father was a shadow, a function of light or thought; he was gone. The fabulous gifts he sent were solid, but you could look at them and hold them and nothing would happen, there was no secret message in the velvet lining of the jewelry box or in the belly of the silver elephant, no matter how you poked and shook them. He was not even a voice. And neither were we: invisible and silent. We could send nothing but paper to make him see us, nothing but letters, pictures, gold stars stuck on school-work. We'd hurl this stuff halfway around the world, but it was dead by the time it reached him.

And his blue-ink words were dead on the page by the time he folded each letter and slid it into an envelope, sealed it, addressed it, licked the stamps and placed them on the corner, slipped the envelope in his breast pocket, took it with him in the car to the Australian Embassy, and mailed it, and it flew over the Pacific and the Rockies and the Mississippi River until it reached Washington, then fell through the brass slot in the heavy oak door and was picked up by my mother and looked at for a moment, then propped smartly for us against an Indonesian figurine on the orange chest. By the time Maggy and I had slit open the envelope and read the letter, his words were dead. And no matter how much you looked at them, they only said what they said, sentences about Nicholas and the heat and always Patricia and Jenny, something missing even though he seemed fond. A phantom limb, not there but aching.

Whereas Paul was actually there. He would stride from the Jaguar, eyes straight ahead as he moved fast up the sidewalk, whistling low. He'd come through the screen door and stand there, regard the state of the house. Sometimes he'd keep whistling in the kitchen as he fixed a drink — he whistled with arabesques like smoke — and if so, that was lucky. He'd tell jokes that night, horror stories. In the living room with a scotch, or at dinner, he'd imitate a shark to terrify us. His pupilless eyes were utterly focused, and even his nose tilted up like a shark's. He'd stare dead ahead and pull down his mouth until he looked vacant, a monster, and glide and suddenly lunge, twist his head, and rip. But it was funny, a terrifying sort of funny. In a low, conspiratorial voice he told us about a boy attacked by a shark in the San Francisco Bay as he swam with his girlfriend, and how first the shark ripped off the boy's left leg, then his right, then his left arm, then his right, and his girlfriend clutched him under the chin and kept swimming to shore — until finally when she reached the sand, all she held was the boy's bleeding head.

He told stories about the Abominable Snowman, his face shuddering and eyes bulging as he simply said the name, or about a man with a hook instead of a hand, or about the hand itself that had been cut off but could still move, alive. Paul would lay his own hand on the table and drop a napkin over his wrist to isolate it, then jerk his fingers in little spasms, and stare down at them, horrified, and I'd get carried away and scream. Then he'd laugh and return the napkin to his lap and keep eating. He'd get back to the original subject, Humphrey or Nixon or some jackass in the department, but then in a pause, as he chewed, he might notice us still sitting there and get back to the shark.

“So do you know what to do,” he might say, dead serious, “if you see a shark coming your way? you're out in the water, swimming way the hell out there, and you see a big fin gliding your way?”

He'd wait for an answer, brows high, expectant.

I had no idea. I didn't even like having my legs under the table.

"No? Well, I'll tell you." He'd put down his knife and fork, lean forward, lower his voice. "Here's what you do. You wait until that big fin is almost there, wait until he's *just about got you*. Keep an eye on him, though. You don't want a mistake. Then at the last minute, at the very last minute — you twist around fast and grab his fin," and he twisted and grabbed in his chair to demonstrate, his eyes squinting across the sea.

"Then what?"

"You ride!"

"But then what?"

He shrugged. Who cared? The best part was over.

This was good humor. Otherwise, when he came in the door, after he'd gone to the kitchen and tossed a few ice cubes into a glass and poured a good inch of scotch, he'd return to the living room, jiggling his glass, and position himself on the sofa. He'd snap open the paper or switch on the news, read one of the letters from his girls, the real girls, and if you happened to come near or make a noise, he'd stop and stare as if he had no idea who the hell you were or what the hell you were doing there. If you said nothing worth hearing, he'd turn away: no patience for losers or fools. But if you said something clever he might lift a brow and take interest. And if you said something downright daring, he'd laugh, and those dark eyes would linger on your face, consider you: as if you might just be worth his while. And that current of interest was the start of everything, the current that lit me to life.

In that same room, on that striped brown sofa where Paul would sit and regard me — on that sofa when I was sixteen, I sat with a boy in the dark, a boy who wasn't the one I loved but who had come over one night to try his luck, and he put his arm around me, laughed, and softly sang: *Jane, if you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with*. So I lay back and let him slide his hand under my shirt, let him hold my breasts, kiss my neck, suck so hard the blood nearly broke through the skin, a pain that soothed, and I pretended not to care that he wasn't the one, because by then finding such replacements seemed natural.

At the beginning, Maggy tried to please Paul, but soon she didn't bother. An incident I've been told about. Walking with him one day in Washington, through a park or down a street, Maggy, seven, put her hand up to be held. He slipped his own hand in his pocket.

Was he thinking of his real girls? Trying to stay true?

Another incident, again his hand, but this moment Maggy and I both remember: We sat in Paul's old Jag while he went to the post office or liquor store, and, restless, Maggy found a Red Hot in the glove compartment and gave it to me to try. When he came back and saw me sucking, he turned to Maggy, demanded to know, and she said, Someone threw it in the window! He slapped her leg fast, a slap that left a hand burning on her skin for days, forever, it burns there still, and this moment — the car, Paul's face, that red-hot hand — established relations among us. I was the cute one, the baby, the preferred. He would never slap me.

Maybe she was old enough to stay true to Daddy, or maybe she didn't need to fix herself on one father or the other. She was slim, tall, with a boyish haircut and one blue eye and one green (*You look just as darling as I expected and hoped and you certainly are growing tall, too*, wrote Daddy. *It's hard*

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