

THE GIRL WHO LEFT HER SOCK ON THE FLOOR

Jessica dangled a sock between her thumb and forefinger, studied it, and let it drop. “There are times,” she said, “one wearies of rooming with a pig.”

Pig. Francie checked to see what page she was on and slammed *World History* shut. “Why not go over to the nice, clean library?” she said. “You could go to the nice, clean library, and you could think nice, clean thoughts. I’ll just root around here in the homework.” She pulled her blanket up and turned to the window, her eyes stinging.

Faint, constant crumblings and tricklings . . . Outside, spring was sneaking up under the cradle of snow in the valley, behind the lacy gray air that veiled everything except the girl, identifiable as hardly more than the red dot of her jacket, who was winding up the hill toward the dorm.

Jessica sighed noisily and dumped a stack of clothing into a drawer. “I will get to that stuff, please, Jessica,” Francie said, “if you’ll just kindly leave it.”

Jessica gazed sorrowfully at Francie’s ear, then bent down to retrieve a dust-festooned sweatshirt from beneath Francie’s bed.

“You know,” Francie said, “there are people in the world—not many, but a few—to whom the most important thing is not whether there happens to be a sock on the floor. There

are people in the world who are not afraid to face reality, to face the fact that the floor is the natural place for a sock, that the floor is where a sock just naturally goes when it's off. But do we fearless few have a voice? No. No, these are words which must never be spoken—true, Jessica? This is a thought which must never be thought.”

It was Cynthia in the red jacket, the secretary, Francie saw now—not one of the students. Cynthia wasn't much older than the seniors, but she lived in town and never came to meals. “Right, Jessica?” Francie said.

There was some little oddness about seeing Cynthia outside the office—as if something were leaking somewhere.

“Jessica?” Francie said. “Oh, well. *‘But the poor, saintly girl had gone deaf as a post. The end.’*”

Jessica's voice sliced between Francie and the window. “Look, Francie, I don't want to trivialize your pain or anything, but I'm getting kind of bored over here. Besides which, I am not your personal maid.”

“Oink oink,” Francie said. “Grunt, grunt. *‘Actually, not the end, really, at all, because God performed a miracle, and the beautiful deaf girl could hear again, though everything from that moment on sounded to her as the gruntings of pigs.’*”

“As the gruntings of pigs?” Jessica demanded. “Sounded as gruntings?”

“Oink oink,” Francie said. She opened *World History* to page 359 again. “An Artist's Conception of the Storming of the Bastille.” Well, and who were “Editors Clarke & Melton,” for that matter, to be in charge of what was going on? To decide which, out of all the things that went on, were *things that had happened?* Yeah, “World History: The Journey of Two Editors and Their Jobs.” Why not a picture of people trapped in their snooty boarding school with their snooty roommates?

“Anyhow, guess what, next year we both get to pick new roommates.”

“If we’re both still here,” Jessica said. “Besides, that’s then—”

“What does *that* mean?” Francie said.

“You don’t have to shout at me all the time,” Jessica said. “Besides, as I was saying, that’s then and this is now. And if I were you, I’d stop calling Mr. Klemper ‘Sex Machine.’ Sooner or later someone’s going to—”

But just then the door opened, and the girl, Cynthia, was standing there in her red jacket. “Frances McIntyre?” Cynthia said. She stared at Francie and Jessica as though she had forgotten which one Francie was. And Francie and Jessica stared back as though they had forgotten, too. “Frances McIntyre, Mrs. Peck wants to see you in the Administration Building.”

Jessica watched, flushed and round-eyed, as Francie put on her motorcycle jacket and work boots. “You’re going to freeze like that, Francie,” Jessica said, and then Cynthia held the door open.

“Francie—” Jessica said. “Francie, do you want me to go with you?”

Francie had paused on the threshold. She didn’t turn around, and she couldn’t speak. She shook her head.

What had she done? What had been seen or heard or said? Had someone already told Mr. Klemper? Was it cutting lacrosse? Had she been reported smoking again in back of the Science Building? Because if she had she was out. Out. Out. End. The end of her fancy scholarship, the end of her education, the end of her freedom, the end of her future. No, the beginning of a new future, her real future, the one that had been lying in wait for her all along, whose snuffly breathing she could hear in the dark. She’d live out her days as a checkout

girl, choking on the toxic vapors of household cleaners and rotting baked goods, trudging home in the cold to rot, herself, in the scornful silence of her bulky, furious mother. Her mother, who had slaved to give ungrateful Francie this squandered opportunity. Her mother, who wouldn't tolerate a sock on the floor for as long as one instant.

Mrs. Peck's bleached blue eyes stared at Francie as Francie stood in front of her, shivering, each second becoming more vividly aware that her jacket, her little, filmy dress, her boots, her new nose ring all trod on the boundaries of the dress code. "Do sit down, please, Frances," Mrs. Peck said.

Mrs. Peck was wearing, of course, a well-made and proudly unflattering suit. On the walls around her were decorative, framed what-were-they-called, Francie thought—Wise Sayings. "I have something very, very sad, I'm afraid, to tell you, Frances," Mrs. Peck began.

Out, she was *out*. Francie's blood howled like a storm at sea; her heart pitched and tossed.

But Mrs. Peck's voice—what Mrs. Peck's voice seemed to be saying, was that Francie's mother was dead.

"What?" Francie said. The howling stopped abruptly, as though a door had been shut. "My mother's in the hospital. My mother broke her hip."

Mrs. Peck bowed her head slightly, over her folded hands. "EVERYTHING MUST BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY, NOTHING TRAGICALLY," the wall announced over her shoulder. "FORTUNE AND HUMOR GOVERN THE WORLD."

"My mother has a broken hip," Francie insisted. "Nobody dies from a broken fucking *hip*."

Mrs. Peck's eyes closed for a moment. "There was an embolism," she said. "Apparently, this is not unheard of. Patients who greatly exceed an ideal weight . . . That is, a Miss Healy

called from the hospital. Do you remember Miss Healy? A student nurse, I believe. I understand you met each other when you went to visit your mother several weeks ago. Your mother must have tried to get up sometime during the night. And most probably—” Mrs. Peck frowned at a piece of paper and put on her glasses. “Yes. Most probably, according to Miss Healy, your mother wished to go to the toilet. Evidently, she would have fallen back against her pillow. The staff wouldn’t have discovered her death until morning.”

Bits of things were falling around Francie. “‘Wouldn’t have?’” she plucked from the air.

“This is, of course, a reconstruction,” Mrs. Peck said. “Miss Healy came on duty this afternoon. Your mother wasn’t there, and Miss Healy became concerned that perhaps no one had thought to notify you. A thoughtful young woman. I had the impression she was acting outside official channels, but . . .”

“But *all’s well that ends well*,” Francie said.

Mrs. Peck’s eyes rested distantly on Francie. “I wonder,” she said. “It might be possible, under the terms of your scholarship, to arrange for some therapy when you return.” Her gaze wandered up the chattering wall. “A hospital must be a terribly difficult thing to administer,” she remarked to it graciously. “I have absolutely no one to bring you to Albany, Frances, I’m afraid. I’ll have to call someone in your family to come for you.”

Francie gasped. “You can’t!” she said.

Mrs. Peck frowned. She appeared to be embarrassed. “Ah,” she said, no doubt picturing, Francie thought, some abyss of mortifying circumstances. “In that case . . .” she said. “Yes. I’ll have Mr. Klemper cancel French tomorrow, and he—”

“Why can’t I take the morning bus?” Francie said. “I’ve

taken that bus a thousand times.” She was going red, she knew; one more second and she’d cry. “Don’t cancel French,” she said. “I always take that bus. *Please.*”

Mrs. Peck’s glance strayed up the wall again, and hesitated. “HONI SOIT QUI MAL Y PENSE,” Francie read.

Mrs. Peck took off her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Miss Healy,” she mused. “Such an unsuitable name for a nurse, isn’t it. People must often make foolish remarks.”

How could it be true? How could Francie be on the bus now, when she should be at school? The sky hadn’t changed since yesterday, the trees and fields out the window hadn’t changed; Francie could imagine her mother just as clearly as she’d ever been able to, so how could it be true?

And yet her mother would have been dead while she herself had been asleep, dreaming. Of what? Of what? Of Mr. Davis, probably. Not of her mother, not dreaming of a little wad of blood coalescing like a pearl in her mother’s body, preparing to wedge itself into her mother’s heart.

If you were to break, for example, your hip, there would be the pain, the proof, telling you all the time it was true: *that’s then and this is now*. But this thing—each second it had to be true all over again; she was getting hurled against each second. *Now*. And *now again*—*thwack!* Maybe one of these seconds she’d smash right through and find herself in the clear place where her mother was alive, scowling, criticizing . . .

Out the window, snow was draining away from the patched fields of the small farms, the small, failing farms. Rusted machinery glowed against the sky in fragile tangles. Her mother would have been dead while Francie got up and took her shower and worried about being late to breakfast and was late

to breakfast and went to biology and then to German and then dozed through English and then ate lunch and then hid in the dorm instead of playing lacrosse and then quarreled with Jessica about a sock. At some moment in the night her mother had gone from being completely alive to being completely dead.

The passengers were scraggy and exhausted-looking, like a committee assigned to the bus aeons earlier to puzzle out just this sort of thing—part of a rotating team whose members were picked up and dropped off at stations looping the planet. How different they were from the team of sleek girls at school, who already knew everything they needed to know. Which team was Francie on? Ha-ha. She glanced at the man across the aisle, who nodded commiseratingly between bites of the vile-smelling food he lifted from a plastic-foam container on his lap.

All those hours during which her life (along with her mother) had gone from being one thing to being another, it had held its shape, like a car window Francie once saw hit by a rock. The rock hit, a web of tiny, glittering lines fanned out, and only a minute or so later had the window tinkled to the street in splinters.

The dazzling, razor-edged splinters had tinkled around Francie yesterday afternoon in Mrs. Peck's voice. "Your family." "Have someone in your family come for you." Well, fine, but where on earth had Mrs. Peck got the idea there *was* anyone in Francie's family?

From Francie's mother, doubtless, the world's leading expert in giving people ideas without having to say a single word. "A proud woman" was an observation people tended to make, vague and flustered after encountering her. But what did that mean, "proud"? Proud of her poverty. Proud of her

poor education. Proud of her unfashionable size. Proud of bringing up her Difficult Daughter, Without an Iota of Help. So what was the difference, when you got right down to it, between pride and shame?

Francie had a memory, one of her few from early childhood, that never altered or dimmed, however often it sprang out: herself in the building stairwell with Mrs. Dougherty, making Mrs. Dougherty laugh. She could still feel her feet fly up as her mother grabbed her and pulled her inside, still hear the door slam. She could still see (and yet this was something she could never have seen, really) skinny Mrs. Dougherty cackling alone in the hall. "*How could you embarrass me like that?*" her mother said. The wave of shock and outrage and humiliation engulfed Francie again with each remembering; she felt her mother's fierce grip on her arm. Francie was an embarrassment. What on earth could she have been doing in the hall? An *embarrassment*. Well, *so be it*.

On the day she had brought Francie all the way from Albany to be interviewed at school, Francie's mother—wearing gloves!—had a private conversation with Mrs. Peck. Francie sat in the outer office and waited. Cynthia had been typing demurely, and occasionally other girls would come through—perfect girls, beautiful and beautifully behaved and sly. Francie could just picture their mothers. When she eventually did see some—Jessica's tall, chestnut-haired mother among them—it turned out that her imagination had not exaggerated.

Waiting in the outer office, Francie feared (Francie hoped) she was to be turned ignominiously away. Instead, she was confronted by Mrs. Peck's withering smile of welcome; Mrs. Peck was gluttonous for Francie's scores. That Francie and her mother looked, each in her own way, so entirely *unsuitable* appeared to increase, rather than diminish, their desirability.

When her mother and Mrs. Peck emerged from the office together that afternoon, a blaze of triumph and contempt crackled behind the veneer of patently suspect humility on her mother's face. Mrs. Peck, on the other hand, looked as if she'd been bonked on the head with a plank.

Surely it was during that conference that Francie's family had been born. Her mother's gift (the automatic nuancing of the unspoken) and Mrs. Peck's mandate (to heap distinction upon herself) had intertwined to generate little tendrils of plausible realities. Which were now generating tendrils of their own: an imaginary church with imaginary relatives—*suitable* relatives—wavering behind viscous organ music and bearing with simple dignity their imaginary grief. Oh, her poor mother! Her poor mother! What possible business was it of Mrs. Peck's *when* her mother had wanted to go to the toilet for the last time?

Several companionable tears made their way down Francie's face, turning from hot to cold. The sensation consoled her as long as it lasted. When she opened her eyes, she saw the frayed outskirts of town.

Francie climbed the stairs cautiously, lest creakings draw the still gregarious Mrs. Dougherty to her peephole. She paused with her key in the lock before contaminating irreversibly the silence, her mother's special silence, which, she thought, a person had to shout to be heard over. Francie leaned her head against the door's cool plane, listening, then turned the key. The lock's tumbling sounded like a gunshot.

A little colorless sunlight had forced its way around the neighboring buildings and lay, exhausted, across the floor. A fine coating of city grime sealed the sills in front of the closed windows like insulation. Her mother's bed was tightly made;

the bedspread was as mute as the surface of a lake into which a clue had been dropped long before.

The only disorder in the kitchen was a cup Francie had left in the sink when she'd come to see her mother in the hospital three weeks earlier, still full of dark liquid in which velvety spots had begun to blossom. Francie sat down at the table. The night she'd finally dared to ask her mother what had happened to her father they'd been in here, just finishing the dishes. Francie remembered: her mother was holding a white dish towel; she started to speak.

Too late, then, for Francie to retract the question—a question that had been clogging her mouth ever since the day, years before, when Corkie Patterson had pummeled into her the concept that every single person on earth had a father. As Francie clutched the wet counter her mother spoke of the sound—the terrible fused sound of brakes and the impact—the crowds out the window, which at first hid everything, the siren circling down on their block like a hawk. She did not use the word “blood,” but when she finished her story and left the room without so much as a glance for Francie, Francie lifted her dripping fingers and stared at them.

After that, Francie's mother was even more unyielding, as though she were ashamed of her husband's death, or ashamed to have spoken of it. And Francie's father evaporated without a trace. Francie had only cryptic fragments from before that night in the kitchen with which to assemble the story: her parents married at eighteen, she'd figured out. Had they loved each other? The undiminishing vigor of her mother's resentment toward absolutely everything was warming, in its way—there must have been love to produce all that hatred.

The bathroom, too, was clean—spotless, actually, except for a tiny smudge on the mirror. A fingerprint. Hers? Her

mother's? She peered past it, into her own face. Had he even known there was to be a baby? Just think—things that you did went on and on, turning into situations, for example. Into people . . .

As little as Francie knew about him, it would be infinitely more than he could have known about her. There were no pictures, but if she were to subtract her mother's eyes . . . In just a few years, she would see changes in her face that her father had not lived to see in his.

"In a few years!" Bad enough she had to deal with "in a few minutes." *When you return*, Mrs. Peck had said. Well, sure, a person couldn't just stay at school, probably, when her mother died. But what on earth was she supposed to do here?

Her mother would have told her. Francie snatched open a drawer and out flew the fact of her mother's slippery, pinkish heap of underwear. Her mother's toothbrush sat next to the mirror in a glass. In the mirror, past the fingerprint, her mother's eyes lay across her own reflection like a mask.

The hospital floated in the middle of a vast ocean of construction, or maybe it was demolition; a nation in itself, of which all humans were, at every moment, potential citizens. The inevitable false move, and it was wham, onto the gurney, with workers grabbing smocks and gloves to plunge into the cavity of you, and the lights that burned all night. Outside this building you lived as though nothing were happening to you that you didn't know about. But here, there was simply no pretending.

Cynthia had come up the hill, Mrs. Peck had sent Francie home, and now here she was—completely lost; she'd come in the wrong entrance. People passed, in small groups,

not touching or speaking. The proliferating corridors and rondas bloomed with soft noises—chiming, and disembodied announcements, and the muted tapping of canes and rubber shoes and walkers. The ceilings and floors were the same color and had the same brightness; metal winked, signaling between wheelchairs and bedrails. Francie tried to suppress the notion, which had popped up from somewhere like a groundhog, that her mother was still alive, lost here somewhere herself.

Two unfamiliar nurses sat at a desk at the mouth of the wing where Section E, Room 418, was. In their crisp little white hats they appeared to be exempt from error. They looked up as Francie approached, and their faces were blank and tired, as if they knew Francie through and through—as if they knew everything there was to know about this girl in the short, filmy dress and motorcycle jacket and electric-green socks, who was coming toward them with so much difficulty, as if the air were filled with invisible restraints.

But, as it turned out, when Francie tried to explain herself, using (presumably) key, she thought, words, like “Kathryn McIntyre,” and “Room 418,” and “dead,” even then neither of the nurses seemed to understand. “Did you want to speak to a doctor?” one of them said.

A tiny, hot beading of sweat sprang out all over Francie. From the moment she was born people had been happy to tell her what to do, down to the most minute detail; Eds. Clarke & Melton knew just what was happening; there were admonitions and exhortations plastered all over the walls—this is how to behave, this is what to think, this is how to think it, that’s then, this is now, this is where to put your sock—but no one had ever said one little thing that would get her through any five given minutes of her life!

She stared at the nurse who had spoken: *Say it*, Francie

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willed her, but the nurse instead turned her attention to a form attached to a clipboard. “Is Miss Healy around?” Francie asked after a minute.

The fact was, Francie would not have recognized Miss Healy; she’d hardly noticed the broad-faced, slightly clumsy-looking girl who’d been changing the water in a vase of flowers as Francie had listened to her mother describe, with somber gloating, the damage to her body, the shock of finding herself on the ice with her pork chop and canned peaches and so forth strewn around her, the pitiable little trickle of milk she had watched flow from the ruined carton into the filthy slush before she understood that she couldn’t move.

“She never complained,” Miss Healy was saying, in a melancholy, slightly adenoidal voice. “She was such a pleasant person. You could tell the terrible pain she was in, but she never said a word.” Miss Healy directed her mournful recital toward Francie’s elbow, as if she were in danger of being derailed by Francie’s face. “And when the people from her office brought candy and flowers? She was just so *polite*. Even though you could see those things were not what she wanted.”

Oh, great. Who but her mother could get someone to say that her pain was obvious but that she never complained? Who but her mother could get someone to say she was polite even though everyone could tell she didn’t want their gifts? No doubt about it, the body they’d carted off almost a day and a half ago from Room 418 had been her mother’s—Miss Healy had just laid waste, in her squelchy voice, to *that* last wisp of hope.

“The thing is,” Francie said, “what am I supposed to do?”

“To do?” Miss Healy said. Her look of suffering was momentarily whisked away. “I mean, unfortunately, your mother’s dead.”

“No, I know,” Francie said. “I get that part. I just don’t know what to *do*.”

Miss Healy looked at her. Clearly Francie was turning out to be, unlike her mother, *not a pleasant person*. “Well, you’ll want to grieve, of course,” Miss Healy said, as if she were remembering a point from a legal document. “Everyone needs closure.” She frowned, then unexpectedly addressed, after all, Francie’s problem. “I’ll call downstairs so you can see her.”

Fading smells of bodies clung to the air like plaintive ghosts, their last friendly overtures vanquished by the stronger smells of disinfectants. An indecipherable muttering came from other ghosts, sequestered in a TV suspended from the ceiling. Outside the window huge, predatory machines prowled among mounds of trash.

Miss Healy returned. “Mrs. McIntyre isn’t downstairs. I’m really sorry—I guess they’ve sent her on.”

They? On? If only there were someone around to take over. Anyone. Jessica, even. At least Jessica would be able to ask some sensible question. “On . . .” Francie began uncertainly, and Jessica gave her a little shove. “On where?”

“Oh,” Miss Healy said. “Well, I mean, does your family use any in particular?”

Francie stared: Where would Jessica even begin with that one?

“Does your family have a particular one they like,” Miss Healy explained. “Mortuary.”

“It’s just me and mother,” Francie said.

Miss Healy nodded, as if this confirmed her point. “Uh-huh. So they’d have sent her on to whatever place was specified by the next of kin.”

Francie felt Jessica start to giggle. “It’s just me and mother,” Francie said again.

“Just whoever your mother put down on the AN37-53,” Miss Healy said. “Not literally the next of kin necessarily—she couldn’t have used you, for instance, because you’re a minor. But just, if there’s no spouse, people might put down someone at their office, say. Or she might have used that nice friend of hers who came to visit once, Mrs. Dougherty.”

Yargh. It wasn’t enough that her mother had died—no, they had to toss her out, into that huge, melted mob, *the dead*, who couldn’t speak for themselves, who were too indistinguishable to be remembered, who could be used to prove anything, who could be represented any way at all! “My mother *hates* everyone at her office,” Francie said. “My mother *hates* Mrs. Dougherty. Mother calls Mrs. Dougherty that buggy Irish slut.”

Miss Healy drew back. “Well, I guess your mom wasn’t expecting to *die*, exactly, when she filled out that form,” she said, and then recovered herself. “There, now. I’ll call down again. Even *this* crazy morgue has files, I guess.”

Out the window a wrecking ball swung toward a solitary wall. Miss Healy hesitated. She seemed to be waiting for something. “I called that lady at the school,” she said. She stood looking at Francie, and Francie realized that she and Miss Healy must be almost the same age. “I just didn’t figure there’d be some other way you’d know.”

“How did mother get all the way out here?” Francie asked the man who greeted her.

The man’s little smile intensified the ruefulness of his expression. “We get a lot of folks out this way,” he said. “You might be surprised.”

“That’s what I meant,” Francie said. “I meant I was surprised.”

The man jumped slightly, as if Francie had gummed him on the ankle, and then smiled ruefully again. “Serving all faiths,” he explained, gesturing at a sign on the wall. “*Serving all faiths*,” Francie read. “*Owned and operated by Luther and Theodore T. Ade. When you’re in need, call for Ade.*” “Also,” the man added, “competitive pricing. But mainly, first in the phone book.”

He disappeared behind a door, and Francie jogged from foot to foot to warm herself—it had been a long walk from the last stop on the bus line. She looked around. Not much to see: a counter holding some file folders, a calendar and a mirror on the wall, several chairs, and a round table on which lay a dog-eared copy of *Consumer Reports*. So this was where her mother had got to—nowhere at all.

“Won’t be another minute.” The man was back in the room. “Teddy T.’s just doing the finishing touches.”

Finishing touches? Francie blanched—she’d almost forgotten what this place was. “You’re not using lipstick, are you?” she managed to say. “Mother hated it.”

The man glanced rapidly at the mirror and then back at Francie.

“Lipstick,” Francie said. “On her.”

“‘On her . . .’” the man said. As he stared at Francie, the room lost its color and flattened; swarming black dots began to absorb the table and the counter and the mirror. “I’m very sorry if that’s what you had in mind, Miss, ah . . .” dots streamed out of the dot man to say. The riffling of file folders amplified into a deafening splash of dots, and then Francie heard, “I’m very, very sorry, because those were definitely not the instructions. I’ve got the fax right here—from your dad, right? Yup, Mr. McIntyre.”

Francie’s vision and hearing cleared before her muscles got a grip on themselves. She was on the floor, splayed out, confus-

ingly, as her mother must have been on the ice, and the man was kneeling next to her, holding a glass of water, although, also confusingly, her hair and clothing were drenched—sweat, she noted, amazed.

“O.K. now?” the man asked. Next to him was a cardboard box, about two feet square, tied up with twine.

Francie nodded.

“Happens,” the man said, sympathetically.

Francie finished the water slowly and carefully while the man fetched a little wooden handle and affixed it to the twine around the box. Things had gone far beyond misrepresentation now.

“And here’s the irony,” the man said. “We deliver.”

All night long, Francie fell, plummeting through the air. When she finally managed to pry herself awake with the help of the pale wands of light along the blinds, she found herself sprawled forcefully back on her mattress, aching, as if she’d been hurled from a great height. On the kitchen floor was the cardboard box. Francie hefted it experimentally—yesterday it had been intolerably heavy; this morning it was intolerably light.

O.K., first in the phone book, true enough. (“See display ad, page 182.”) “Hi,” Francie said when the man answered. “This is Francie McIntyre. The girl who fainted yesterday? Could you—” For an instant, Miss Healy stood in front of her again, looking helpless. “First of all,” Francie said. “I mean, thanks for the water. But second of all, could you give me my father’s address, please? And, I guess, his name.”

Kevin McIntyre—not all that amazing, once you got your head around the notion that he happened to be alive. And he lived on a street called West Tenth, in New York City. Francie

looked out the window to the place where there had been for some years now a silently shrieking crowd and a puddle of blood, into which long, spotty raindrops were now falling. Strange—it was raining into the puddle, but at the level of the window it was snowing.

In the closet she found an old plastic slicker. She took it from the hanger and wrapped it around the cardboard box, securing it roughly with tape. Yes, everything had to be *just right*. But the only thing she'd actually *said* to Francie in all these sixteen years was a lie.

Francie looked around at the bluish stillness. “Hello hello,” she called. Was that her voice? Was that her mother’s silence, fading? What had become of everything that had gone on here? “Hello hello,” she said. “Hello hello hello hello . . .”

The bus ticket cost Francie eighteen dollars. Which left not all that much of the seventy-three and a bit that she'd saved up, fortunately, to get her back to school and, in fact, Francie thought, to last for the rest of her life. “But, hey,” Jessica returned just long enough to point out, “you’ll be getting free therapy.”

Francie put her box on the overhead rack and scrambled to a window seat. *West Tenth Street*. West of what? The tenth of how many? How on earth was she going to find her way around? If only her mother had let her go last year when Jessica invited her to spend Thanksgiving in New York with her family. But Francie’s mother had been able to picture Jessica’s mother just as easily as Francie had been able to. “Out of the question,” she’d said.

“. . . if *there’s no spouse* . . .” So, her mother must have used his name on that form! They must never have got a divorce.

Could he be a bigamist? Some people were. And he might think Francie was coming to blackmail him. He might decide to kill her right then and there—just reach over and grab a . . . a . . .

Well, one thing—he wasn't living on the street; she had his address. And he wasn't totally feeble-minded; he'd sent a fax. Whatever he was, at least what he wasn't was everything except that. And the main thing he wasn't, for absolute certain, was a guy who'd been mashed by a bus.

"Would you like a hankie?" the lady in the seat next to Francie's asked, and Francie realized that she had wiped her eyes and nose on her sleeve. "I have one right here."

"Oh, wow," Francie said gratefully, and blew her nose on the handkerchief the lady produced from a large, shabby cloth sack on her lap.

Despite the shabbiness of the sack, Francie noticed, the lady was tidy. And pretty. Not pretty, really, but exact—with exact little hands and an exact little face. "Do you live in New York?" she asked Francie.

"I've never even been there," Francie said. "My roommate from school invited me to visit once, but my mother wouldn't let me go." Jessica's family had a whole apartment building to themselves, Jessica had told her; she'd called it a "brownstone." It was when Francie had foolishly reported this interesting fact that her mother put her foot down. "Actually," Francie added, "I think my mother was afraid. We had a giant fight about it."

"A mother worries, of course," the lady said. "But it's a lovely city. People tend to have exaggerated fears about New York."

"Yeah," Francie said. "Well, I guess maybe my mother had exaggerated fears about a lot of things. She—" The box! Where was the box? Oh, there—on the rack. Francie's heart

was beating rapidly; clashing in her brain were the desire to reveal and the desire to conceal what had become, in the short course of the conversation, a secret. “Do you live in New York?” she asked.

“Technically, no,” the lady said. “But I’ve spent a great deal of happy time there. I know the city very well.”

Francie’s jumping heart flipped over. “Have you ever been to West Tenth Street?” she asked.

“I have,” the lady said.

Francie didn’t dare look at the lady. “Is it a nice street?” she asked carefully.

“Very nice,” the lady said. “All the streets are very nice. But it seems a strange day to be going there.”

“It’s strange for me,” Francie said loudly. “My mother died.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” the lady said. “My mother died as well. But evidently no one was hurt in the accident.”

“Huh?” Francie said.

“Amazing as it seems,” the lady said, “I believe no one was hurt. Although you’d think, wouldn’t you, that an accident of that sort—a blimp, simply sailing into a building . . .”

Francie felt slightly sickened—she wasn’t going to have another opportunity to tell someone for the first time that her mother had died, to learn what that meant by hearing the words as she said them for the first time. “How could a blimp just go crashing into a building?” she said crossly.

“These are things we can’t understand,” the lady said with dignity.

Oops, Francie thought—she was really going to have to watch it; she kept being mean to people, and just completely by mistake.

“‘How could such-and-such a thing happen?’ we say,” the lady said. “As if this moment or that moment were fitted

together, from . . . bits, and one bit or another bit might be some type of mistake. ‘There’s the building,’ people say. ‘It’s a building. There’s the blimp. It’s a blimp.’ That’s the way people think.”

Francie peered at the lady. “Wow . . .” she said, considering.

“You see, people tend to settle for the first explanation. People tend to take things at face value.”

“Oh, definitely,” Francie said. “I mean, absolutely.”

“But a blimp or a building cannot be a mistake,” the lady said. “Obviously. A blimp or a building are evidence. Oh, goodness—” she said as the bus slowed down. She stood up and gave her sack a little shake. “Here I am.”

“Evidence . . .” Francie frowned; Cynthia’s red jacket flashed against the snow. “Evidence, of, like . . . the future?”

“Well, more or less,” the lady said, a bit impatiently, as the bus stopped in front of a small building. “Evidence of the present, really, I suppose. You know what I mean.” She reached into her sack and drew out some papers. “You seem like a very sensitive person—I wonder if you’d be interested in learning about my situation. This is my stop, but you’re welcome to the document. It’s extra.”

“Thank you,” Francie said, although the situation she’d really like to learn about, she thought, was her own. “Wait—” The lady was halfway down the aisle. “I’ve still got your handkerchief—”

“Just hold on to it, dear,” the lady called back. “I think it’s got your name on it.”

The manuscript had a title, *The Triumph of Untruth: A Society That Denies the Workings of the World Puts Us at Ever Greater Risk*. “I’d like to introduce myself,” it began. “My name is Iris Ackerman.”

Hmm, Francie thought: Two people with situations, sitting

right next to each other. Coincidence? She glanced up. The sickening thing was, there were a lot of people on this bus.

“My name is Iris Ackerman,” Francie read again. “And my belief is that one must try to keep an open mind in the face of puzzling experiences, no matter how laughable this approach may subsequently appear. For many years I maintained the attitude that I was merely a victim of circumstance, or chance, and perhaps now my reluctance to accept the ugliness of certain realities will be considered (with hindsight!) willful obtuseness.”

Francie’s attention sharpened—she read on. “Certainly my persecution (by literally thousands of men, on the street, in public buildings, and even, before I was forced to flee it, in my own apartment) is a known fact. (One, or several, of these ruffians went so far as to hide himself in my closet, and even under my bed, when least expected.)

“Why, you ask, should so large and powerful an organization concentrate its efforts on tormenting a single individual? This I do not know. It is not (please believe me) false humility that causes me to say I do not consider myself to be in any way ‘special.’”

Francie sighed. She rested her eyes for a moment on the weedy lot moving by out the window. Not much point, probably, trying to figure out what Iris had been talking about. Yup, she should have known the minute Iris said the word “blimp.”

“I know only,” the manuscript continued, “that there was a moment when I fell into the channel, so to speak, of what was ultimately to be revealed as ‘my life’: In the fall of 1965, when I was twenty years old, I encountered a mathematics professor, an older man, whom I respected deeply. I became increasingly fascinated by certain theories he held regarding the nature of numbers, but he, alas, misunderstood my youth-

ful enthusiasm, and although he had a wife and several children, I was soon forced to rebuff him.

“I continued to feel nothing but the purest and most intense admiration for him, and would gladly have continued our acquaintance. Nevertheless, this professor (Doctor N.) terminated all contact with me (or affected to do so), going so far as to change his telephone number to an unlisted one. Yet, at the same time, he began to pursue me in secret.

“For a period of many months I could detect only the suggestion of his presence—a sort of emanation. Do you know the sensation of a whisper? Or there would sometimes be a telltale hardening, a *crunchiness*, near me. Often, however, I could detect nothing other than a slight discoloration of the atmosphere . . . And then, one day, as I was walking to the library, he was there.

“It was a day of violent heat. People were milling on the sidewalks, waiting. One felt one was penetrating again and again a poisonous, yellow-gray screen that clung to the mouth and the nostrils. I had almost reached the library when I understood that he was behind me. So close, in fact, that he could fit his body to mine. I had never imagined how hard a man’s arms could feel! His legs, too, which were pressed up against mine, were like iron, or lead, and he dug his chin into my temple as he clamped himself around me like a butcher about to slash the throat of a calf. I cried out; the bloated sky split, and out poured a filthy rain. The faces of all the people around me began to wash away in inky streaks. A terrible thing had happened to me—A terrible thing had happened—it *was like water gushing out of my body*.

“Since then, my life has not belonged to me. Why do I not go to the authorities? Of course, I have done so. And they have added their mockery to the mockery of my tormentors:

Psychological help! Tell me: Will ‘psychological help’ alter my history? Will ‘psychological help’ locate Dr. N.? Any information regarding my case will be fervently appreciated. Please contact: Iris Ackerman, P.O. Box 139775, Rochester, N.Y. Yours sincerely, Iris Ackerman.”

Enclaves of people wrapped in ragged blankets huddled against the walls of the glaring station. Policemen sauntered past in pairs, fingering their truncheons. Danger at every turn, Francie thought. Poor Iris—it was horrible to contemplate. And obviously love didn’t exactly clarify the mind, either.

You had to give her credit, though—she was brave. At least she tried to figure things out, instead of just consulting, for example, the wall. To *really* figure things out. Francie blew her nose again. For all the good that did.

Any information regarding my case will be fervently appreciated. But this was not the moment, Francie thought, to lose her nerve. The huge city was just outside the door, and there was no one else to go to West Tenth Street. There was no one else to hear what she had to hear. There was no one else to remember her mother with accuracy. There was no one else to not get the story wrong. There was no one else to reserve judgment. Francie closed one hand tightly around her new handkerchief, and with the other she gripped the handle on her box. The city rose up around her through a peach-colored sunset; now there was no more time.

The man who stood at the door of the apartment (K. McIntyre, #4B) was nice-looking. Nice-looking, and weirdly unfamiliar, as if the whole thing, maybe, were a complete mistake, Francie thought over and over in the striated extrusion of eternity (that was then and this is then; that was now and this

She was filthy, she thought. She smelled. She'd been wearing the same dress, the same socks, for days.

"Can I help you?" he said.

He had no idea why she was there! "Kevin McIntyre?" she said.

"Not back yet," he said. His gaze was pleasant—serene and searching. "Any minute."

He brought her into a big room and sat her down near a fireplace, in a squashy chair. He reached for the chain of a lamp, but Francie shook her head.

"No?" He looked at her. "I'm having coffee," he said. "Want a cup? Or something else—water? Wine? Soda?"

Francie shook her head again.

"Anyhow," he said. "I'm Alex. I'll be in back if you want me."

Francie nodded.

"Can I put your package somewhere for you, at least?" he asked, but Francie folded her arms around the box and rested her cheek against its plastic wrapping.

"Suit yourself," the man said. He paused at the entrance to the room. "You're not a very demanding guest, you know."

Francie felt his attention hesitate and then withdraw. After a moment, she raised her head—yes, he was gone. But then there he was again in the entranceway. "Strange day, huh?" he paused there to say. "Starting with the blimp."

The night before Francie left school, when she'd known so much more about her mother and her father than she knew now, she and Jessica had lain in their beds, talking feverishly. "Anything can happen at any moment," Jessica kept exclaiming. "Anything can just *happen*."

"It's worse than that," Francie had said (and she could still close her eyes and see Cynthia coming up that hill). "It's

if she knew exactly what Francie meant, as if it were she who had brushed against the burning cable of her life.

Her body, Francie noticed, felt as if it had been crumpled up in a ball—she should stretch. *Strange day*. Well, true enough. That was something they could all be sure of. This room was really nice, though. Pretty and pleasantly messy, with interesting stuff all over the place. Interesting, nice stuff . . .

Twilight was thickening like a dark garden, and paintings and drawings glimmered behind it on the walls. As scary as it was to be waiting for him, it was nice to be having this quiet time. This quiet time together, in a way.

Peach, rose, pale green—yes, poor guy; it might be a moment he'd look back on—last panels of tinted light were falling through the window. He might be walking up the street this very second. Stopping to buy a newspaper.

She closed her eyes. He fished in his pocket for change, and then glanced up sharply. Holding her breath, Francie drew herself back into the darkness. *It's your imagination*, she promised; he was going to have to deal with her soon enough—no sense making him see her until he actually had to.