

Sharon Solwitz

Bloody Mary

From row three, seat four Hadley could see five marks on the board, and squinting she recognized them as numbers, and with sufficient energy she could multiply them by the number below, but even squinting, which would one day crease the top of her nose, she couldn't see the little decimal points and she thought of the food she didn't eat this morning — an English muffin her sister had toasted for breakfast, some of Rachel's chips on the bus. Now in the private inside of her desk her fingers unwrapped a bite-size Reese's Peanut Butter Cup while she planned the answer she'd give if called on, three point nine quadrillion. If she acted stupid like she was putting it on, Ms. Santos would stumble over her words, and the boys in the back row, who cracked their knuckles and broke their pencils in half, would laugh.

But Trent Lawson, new this fall at Edison Magnet, had his hand up to answer Ms. Santos's question. Felice Barinholtz waved hers back and forth with good-student urgency. Felice sat one row down and one over, close enough for Hadley to see clearly her round pink cheeks, lips smiling around the right answer. Felice was nice to people, and there was nothing wrong with her looks but for some reason nobody liked her. Hadley stared till she felt a tap on her shoulder, a spiral notebook open to a page with names written down the left margin and across the top. In the row of boxes beside her name were the usual 100%'s, *Fabulous!*, *I LOVE HER*, the O in *LOVE* shaped like a heart. Only RACHEL and MAY SUN got ratings like that. And TRENT LAWSON. Trent came from Texas and talked like a cowboy but he acted like it didn't matter, and then it didn't. By FELICE someone had written *nonentity*.

Hadley traced the evaluation up to its originator, SHERELLE, who had introduced the word *nonentity* into the class vocabulary; who said whatever she thought in a flat voice completely sure of itself. By EMILY BACCUS, who wore glasses and too-small K-mart blouses,

Sherelle had written *pathetic*; hairs rose on the back of Hadley's neck. For a moment she wanted to write *pathetic* by SHERELLE. She would rate FELICE *fabulous*. In fifth grade last year the teacher had asked the class if they were planning to side with good or evil, if they had "moral courage" — it was their choice — and she'd read to them about Joan of Arc, who at fourteen led her country against the English tyrants and was burned at the stake. Hadley was overwhelmed then by the power she'd always hoped she had, without believing; she'd loved that teacher. Now she gazed at the three quarter view of Felice, dark hair brushed around her ear; shiny. Felice glanced back smiling, which was truly *pathetic*, but Hadley had a choice, she could make Felice feel bad or good; bravery like heat coursed out from her heart into her hands, her fingers. "Fabulous," she murmured. In the box where her name coming down met Felice's across, she wrote "fa —."

Then, maybe because she was light-headed from sugar on an empty stomach, the heat went away. She started to shiver, wrapped her legs around each other, bent close to the desk. Her "fa" became *fair*. She raised her hand, asked to see the nurse. Hall pass in hand, she waved goodbye to Rachel, her best friend, then walked to the end of the corridor and out the door.

The fall day was warm and bright but she felt truly sick to her stomach. She should go home, she said to herself. Part of her wanted to lie on the couch and watch TV and eat Oreos and wait for her mother to come from wherever she went in the afternoon. Her mother had gray specks in her blue eyes and strong thin ankles and wrists, and shiny black hair like Snow White. Lips as red as blood, skin as white as snow. She'd been a dancer and she walked like a dancer. Up to last year she'd taught dance in a city program that sent her to different elementary schools where she was very popular. But now sometimes she looked at Hadley as if she didn't recognize her, cold and beautiful like Snow White's stepmother.

Hadley got on the el, which till now she'd only ridden with her mother or a friend's mother. The stop near her school wasn't bad, but she had to turn away from the grassless, junk-filled yards of the slummy houses they passed. She rode downtown, where for the rest of the day she wandered along Michigan Avenue looking at jewelry and high heels and handsome, fastwalking men and women.

An hour or so past the time the school bus would have dropped her off she returned home. Rounding the corner onto her block, she was thinking about Felice and moral courage and if under an oppressive government she'd rise to the nobility of Joan of Arc, and when the white splotch down the street became an ambulance she imagined herself a doctor in a poor, war-torn country, operating while the bullets flew (before, she'd wanted to be an actress). She felt bad for the old sick people who lived on their block, especially for Mrs. Sayres across the street who walked with a walker and had no lawn in front of her house because her dogs pawed it up. The ambulance was parked across from Mrs. Sayres'. She couldn't stand to grow up and be Mrs. Sayres.

Then the ambulance pulled away, siren screaming, and she saw her uncle on the sidewalk in front of their house. Uncle Arnie, their mother's brother, an eye doctor with a big downtown office, was holding Nora's hand. Nora was crying. "Hadley!" he called out, "sweetheart?" Hadley shivered, though the air was warm enough. Sometimes he and Aunt Ellen came to dinner but it was too early now. His face looked sad and stupid. Hadley wanted the sweatshirt she'd left at school. She wanted to get back on the el and ride it down into the tunnel, pressing her nose to the dark glass and the air whistling along the invisible walls and the wheels screaming on the tracks blotting out everything.

She had, though, to let him put his arms around her. She let him explain: Her mother had swallowed something that made her sick and she was going to get it pumped out of her stomach — scary, yes, but there was nothing to worry about. She'd be home tomorrow, maybe even tonight. She'd be fine.

Hadley looked at his face, her breath wanting to get out of her throat like a burp. But he was looking at Nora; in his talking was a secret he was telling Nora, not her; she gazed up out of the way of the secret. The ambulance was gone now. There were lots of green leaves still on the row of trees along the street but some had fallen already, green and yellow on the gray of the pavement. The sun shone on the chain-link fence in front of their house and on the leaves of trees and the shadows of leaves were dark on the pavement.

"I'm going to the hospital," said Uncle Arnie. "Ellen'll bring dinner, later. Meanwhile you and Hadley get your homework done —"

"It's done!" Nora said. "Please, Arnie, I want —."

He gave her another look, and Nora shut up. Hadley was thankful. She didn't want to see her mother sick in the hospital. When he left, Nora practiced the violin, and Hadley went to her room and read a magazine article about actresses with imperfect faces, the subscription from Rachel for her eleventh birthday. She called Rachel and learned about the events of the school afternoon. Sherelle bad mouthed off to Ms. Santos and been sent to the office. Sherelle's mother would have to come in to see the principal. Hadley started laughing.

"Hey, what about you today?" Rachel said. "Were you sick or something?"

Hadley's laughter went on. Every time it started to fade she pictured Sherelle smartalecking Ms. Santos and Sherelle's mother smartalecking the principal, and it fanned into life again. She blotted out sad things when she could, unlike Rachel who thought when she coughed she had AIDS; in the magazine was an article, "A Girl Like You Who Has AIDS."

"I'm all right," she said between gasps. "I'm fine!"

She wanted to be normal, that was all, clear and pure like apple juice, the kind of girl who passed through a room leaving the scent of fresh air. Her uncle's note excused her absence without making anyone look at her strangely; Hadley was grateful. Her mother came home the next day pale and thin but oddly young-looking. She cooked and kept the house clean. Uncle Arnie and Aunt Ellen called often, and had them over to their lakeshore high rise on Friday nights.

Then just after Halloween, with three weeks to Thanksgiving, and eternity till the end of the year, Ms. Santos redid the seating chart.

Hadley sat in front now, between two boys who would have punched each other there in the room if not for the desk between them, *her* desk, over which they evil-eyed each other. The boys were mixed with the girls, which was supposed to lower the din, but Hadley felt lost, abandoned, in danger. It hurt to think of her old place behind Rachel, in front of May Sun, with Sherelle on one side and a quiet smart girl named Lana on the other — like being on a boat on calm water, protected and floaty.

She glanced behind her but her friends were far away now. All she had to look at were the words on the blackboard, easy to read close up, and the flower diagram on the easel with the parts labeled, pistil, stamen — maybe up here she'd get smarter. Competition for Nora.

As well as she could under the circumstances she tried to absorb the lesson, plant reproduction — ooh! But it was hard to listen without someone to roll your eyes to, and really hard not to be able to yawn. The yawn wanted to come now, it was coming, God, she'd better listen, because if you yawned Santos would say, "Are we keeping you up, dear?" and the girls who hated her or were jealous, would laugh. Pistil fertilized stamen, right, or was it the other way around?

She was near dozing when she felt a prick on her scalp, as if she'd been poked with a sharp pencil. She stifled her yelp, rubbed the back of her head, but she was too close to the teacher to turn around. She angled her science book up on her desk, and in its shelter opened the compact from her mother's purse (her mother never noticed these things); in the mirror she checked out Trent Lawson, who sat behind her now. He had a grin on his face. The nonentity beside him was grinning too — David Rappaport who supposedly had a crush on her. David's ears were red and he was leaning back in his chair away from his desk like there was a snake on it. She angled the mirror toward Rachel, three seats back and over one. Rachel held up two encouraging fingers. She trained the mirror on May Sun, but her second best friend was talking to Winston Baines. Last night May Sun had talked to Winston on the phone for an hour, she said, from 7:30 to 8:30.

Hadley directed the mirror past her strawberry blond bangs, her pale eyebrows to the pretty slits of her nostrils, the smooth narrow scallops of her upper lip. Then she heard the words *Bloody Mary*, as distinctly as if someone had whispered them in her ear. She snapped the mirror shut.

This was the girls' current game, played in any dark bathroom. You went in alone, looked in the mirror and said "Bloody Mary" over and over again till you saw in the mirror a face of terror — *stupid*, in Hadley's opinion. So far she'd only pretended to play. She'd turn her back to the mirror, or close her eyes and say *Blood Money*. *Bill Murray*. *Bad Manners*. But now to make a bad day absolutely

unspeakable she began to wonder if her trick had somehow been noticed. If someone she thought was her friend — Sherelle maybe? — had told Trent what to whisper to her. Then, before she could defuse the miserable thought, the back of her head twitched. She turned and saw exactly what Trent Lawson had put on David Rappaport's desk — one of her long reddish hairs.

Her cheeks went sick hot. This was her future rolling out before her like some terrible country. She couldn't stand David Rappaport, his long red face, jeans with the three horizontal creases below the stomach. She didn't have an hour's worth of anything to say on the phone to any boy, let alone David Rappaport. She wanted Trent punished, in the principal's office. She wanted his mother called. She wanted him suspended. Expelled. She raised her hand and waved it back and forth like the goody goodies dying to give answers.

"Yes, Hadley?"

Ms. Santos smiled encouragement. Hadley squeezed her shame into her hand over her mouth. What could she say, what could anybody? That Trent Lawson had pulled a hair out of her head and presented it to David Rappaport? Tears filled her eyes.

"Hadley," Ms. Santos said, "you had a contribution?"

Hadley tried to blank her face of everything but earnest humility.

"About how pollen is disseminated?" the teacher urged gently.

"The pistil fertilizes the stamen," Hadley said.

Ms. Santos's mouth turned down. "Dissemination, not fertilization. How pollen moves from flower to flower. Hadley, you're in dreamland again."

"I mean, the stamen fertilizes the pistil." She smiled like a good-natured idiot, rapping the side of her skull. Ms. Santos walked over to her, stared down over her shoulder.

"What's that in your hand?"

Hadley tried not to look at the pink under the loose weave of the teacher's knit skirt or at her round swell of stomach. She gazed down at her own hand, uncurling her fingers one by one, like petals opening around a stamen or was it a pistil?

"Ask me for it later," Ms. Santos said, extending her hand.

Hadley placed the compact in the teacher's dry white palm. She gazed straight ahead at the labeled flower as her one link to the

society of her girlfriends through this long, bleak class vanished into the maw of Ms. Santos's desk. She fixed on the diagram, spelling the names to herself. Then, as Ms. Santos turned the page of the tablet on the easel, a folded scrap of notebook paper plopped onto Hadley's desk. She brushed it onto her lap, opened it with a secret hand. *Hadley I am very sorry. From Trent Lawson.*

She put her hand over her mouth, trying not to cry. Her hand smelled of the compact, beautifully sweet like a fancy ladies room or the word boudoir.

In the middle of the night Hadley woke up. Her stomach didn't hurt but it felt hot, like when the shampoo girl says, is it too warm, sweetie? and it almost isn't, but it is. She brought her knees to her chest and squeezed. She put a pillow over her stomach. In the light of the nightlight she tried to count the white slats of her mini-blinds, as she'd done last year to calm down after a bad dream, but now she couldn't see them even squinting. The heat in her stomach rose to a burn. She tiptoed in to her mother's room.

It was larger than her room, easily big enough for the kingsize bed. Her mother lay close to the edge as if a large, invisible person were sprawled beside her. In the light from the hall Hadley saw her mother's hair spread black and shiny on the pillow. She prayed God that when she grew up she'd look exactly like her mother. Then she tiptoed into the master bathroom, opened the drawer that held her mother's jewelry box and snatched the first thing that came to hand, which turned out in the light of the hall to be a wide silver bracelet.

Back in her room Hadley held her braceleted wrist up to the arc of lights around her dresser mirror, just out of range of where her face would show. On an impulse she didn't understand she swam her arm back and forth, white and graceful in the silver band like the neck of a swan. There were no bones in her arm. What was she doing? Then an undulation took her too far forward. In the mirror was a flash of white. A clawed finger pointing?

Heart beating wildly she hurled herself into bed. She knew better than to scream. Teeth faintly chattering, she put a pillow over her head, wedged another under her stomach, adjusting her arm so that the band lay flat under her wrist. The bracelet was too big, the stone

irregular in shape and disturbingly veined. And it wasn't hers to wear; her father had given it to her mother for some occasion, a birthday or anniversary. But her mother never wore it. Her mother didn't love her father anymore, or anyone in the family but Nora maybe, and Hadley already suspected there was nothing fixed in the arrangement of wishes, lies and other people's notions that made up herself. She'd memorized the eye chart in her uncle's office, the tiny fifth row O F L C T, and the tinier sixth T Z V E C L, so that her blurred vision was marked 20/20. In her voice was a laughy twitch she'd stolen from Nora. Her bright barbed chatter came from Rachel's cousin, a chubby girl who had a million friends and got elected to everything.

The silver bracelet would inspire the personality she'd don at school tomorrow. Braceleted, she'd walk down the hail with Trent Lawson, who liked her better than she liked him. She was remote and beautiful like her mother, whose feet just skimmed the floor as she passed through a room.

"He's totally in love with you!" Rachel whispered, loud enough for people to hear.

Hadley produced Nora's soft, twitchy laugh. Rachel put a hand on her arm. The two edged away from the group clustered outside the washroom.

"I've never seen that bracelet," Rachel said. "Is it from —?" leaving a space for the new development to reside in its proper luminosity. "In Music he kept looking at you!"

Hadley gazed at the sign on the washroom door, fuzzed though she could read GIRLS. Her stomach hurt dully, as if she'd swallowed a plum whole and it got stuck down there. She told Rachel that when Trent looked at her she couldn't look straight back, a line from a book she'd just read. Not looking at Rachel either but at the door of the second floor washroom where they weren't supposed to be during lunch.

"He makes me feel quivery here," she breathed to Rachel, placing a hand on her stomach. Then the plum in her stomach began to swell. Trent was popular, and Hadley wanted to like him, but this morning at recess she'd walked fast to make him hop to catch up, and she

wasn't in the mood to make up a new story because of the fruit rotting in her stomach and what was happening to the girl inside the washroom.

The rest of the group had moved in the direction of the girlfriends' conferencing, but their attention was likewise fixed on the door. Six girls swarmed the girl who'd just emerged. "Tell us!" cried Felice Barinholtz, who liked to include herself despite Sherelle's eye rolls. Felice touched the newcomer's arm. "Well, May Sun?"

Hadley was close enough to see the tiny freckles on May Sun's perfectly oval gold-colored face. She loved the smooth hairs on the golden skin of her arms, her eyes as calm as water in a glass. Of all the girls in the group she was the only one who truly needed the bra she wore. "You didn't see anything," Hadley whispered.

"Yes, I did."

The rustling, the murmurs ceased. Hadley heard the muffled roar of the lunchroom downstairs, and down the hail, a female teacher's shrill directive. Her stomach felt fat under her hand. She sucked it in.

"It was horrible," May Sun said.

The group gave a collective sigh. Hadley gazed at May Sun, the bottoms of her feet growing moist.

"Was there blood?" said Sherelle, folding her thin arms across her chest. She raised her chin and lowered her eyelids, a gesture as unarguable as the hiss of a snake.

"There was blood on her forehead," said May Sun. "I don't know. It didn't squirt at me." Her face stayed blank and clear; only her mouth moved as she described her pleasantly ghoulish washroom vision. "Who's next?"

"Right," Sherelle said. "We have ten minutes."

The murmur from the group was like air escaping. Eyes went from face to face to face. "Who's left? Who hasn't gone yet?"

Hadley turned to Rachel, tried to find something to say about Trent that would affix her to her friend and to earth, but her mind held nothing but the burn in her stomach. When Sherelle's gaze landed on her and locked in, there was nothing to do but shrug, "What is the deal?" and push open the heavy door to the washroom.

Inside the long, high-ceilinged room she complied with the rule to leave the light off. The air was pale and mottled, dark in the corners where the walls met the ceiling, black where the stall doors stood ajar.

The glints of light were no easier to bear than the shadows, glary spots on the row of sinks where the sun seeped through the grimy, granulated window glass, and a place in the long, corroding mirror she was careful not to glance at. She leaned against a sink, squinted down at her watch and counted her breaths for the five minutes in which she was supposed to be gazing at herself and chanting Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary. Not that she ever would. She'd heard of a girl at a Catholic school who came out of the washroom with a streak of blood across her forehead, knowing the name of the man who would be her husband. Last week Felice emerged crying, her hair parted on the wrong side; she wouldn't say what she'd seen.

Now Hadley wanted to cry, herself, a little. Her eyes weren't working; she could see the numbers on her watch only when it was up to her face. Her stomach throbbed like a wound. A voice whispered, You are average pretty and not that smart.

She subdued the voice by shaking her head from side to side, a gesture she camouflaged, even alone in the bathroom, with an amused smile. She watched her watch and walked out at the end of precisely five minutes, knitting her brow and loosening the set of her head on her shoulders to convey mild fright. "She had a crown on her head," she told the group. "It was glowing hot, I was scared to death."

The girls gazed at her, their eyes open wide. Even Sherelle was silent.

"There was a ring of fire around her head. Blood was dripping down," Hadley said.

"You don't bleed from fire," Sherelle said.

"*She* was. Down her forehead into her eyes. Her black hair was red from the fire. Burning red!"

Sherelle's mouth was a straight line of unbelief. But Rachel looked thrilled. Hadley and Rachel swayed toward each other, touching shoulders in the conscious-unconscious way of girlfriends.

"Who wants to come sleep at my house tonight?" Rachel said. "It'll be so fun!"

Felice's eyes were round with eager good will. "I'll bring my Spice Girls!"

"Oh, that'll be super dupery *duper*!" Sherelle said through her pinched nose.

Felice looked at Sherelle, at the group, confused by the disjunction between the content of what was said and the tone. As if herded by the silence the other girls swayed and shifted into a clump that excluded Felice. Felice shivered in her isolation. Then her arms took hold of each other. She turned almost gracefully and went off down the hall.

Hadley felt Felice's aloneness like a moth at the back of her neck. She wanted to say something — she didn't know what. She looked at the faces of the girls in her group, her eyes wide open like a baby's.

"You're crying, Had!" Sherelle peered at her like an eye doctor. To the others she said as if it were something repulsive, "Hadley's crying!"

Hadley shook out her head, stared back with eyes as hard and dry as marbles. Stronger than anything in herself she felt Sherelle's thin body, the narrow planes of her face. There was power in Sherelle, in the whole body of girls of which she, miraculously, was part. Something evolved from the act of grouping, she was suddenly aware, a mass greater than the sum of the individual members of the group, too great for their cumulative size and weight like a boulder dropped from another planet.

When school was over, instead of getting on her bus, Hadley walked with Trent to his townhouse a few blocks from school. He talked. She said yes, uh huh. Inside, she felt quiet and weak as if she were moving inside a dream. When he opened his garage and climbed in the front seat of his car, she climbed in on the other side. He left the garage door up, but the light was so dim all she could see, really, was the silver horse dangling from his neck. Her bracelet hung on her wrist.

Hadley conjured good feeling for Trent. Where he came from, boys raised prize hogs and wore plaid flannel shirts, but in their school he fit himself right in, to the basketball team and to a group of boys that called themselves The Trojans. The Trojans were more sure of themselves than other sixth grade boys, at least they walked the halls and put on and took off their Bulls jackets as if this were so. Around their necks were chains with a Trojan horse pendant, and they answered teacher questions with bored patience, and every once in a while one of them was caught with a dirty magazine under the books

in his desk, and if they tried out for a part in a school play they usually got it.

Trent pressed the car's cigarette lighter, took a pack of Kools from the glovebox. When the lighter popped he held its burning circle to a cigarette, took a drag, gave it to her. She'd smoked once before, with Sherelle and Rachel. She didn't like it but she knew how to hold the smoke tight in her mouth, then blow it out the hole she made with her lips. While Trent kissed her face and neck she took puff after puff, mixing them with air, blank and graceful as a movie actress. "Trent," she drawled, "have you heard of a woman in history called Bloody Mary?"

"I've heard of Virgin Mary."

"Don't be stupid."

"Not," he said. "How about Mary Magdalene? Mary, Queen of Scots? Mary Ellen Turner?"

"Who's Mary Ellen Turner?"

"My cousin in Dallas!"

His voice was triumphant. He sat back against the driver's seat. Her skin didn't like remembering his lips. There was something repulsive about a boy's lips, even Trent's, though in class sometimes he said things that made people laugh. She set the cigarette in the ashtray, put her arms around him and kissed him hard. She was movie star Miss America. She was actress and audience, inside and outside at the same time — till the distance between whom she was and whom she was trying to be was so great it blew her chest apart, and all she could do was wait with an actressy smile on her face till she could breathe again. She picked up the cigarette, inhaled this time. It had gone out. She made herself laugh. "What about Queen Mary?" she said. "Did she do something terrible? Did something terrible happen to her?"

He gave her a look of fake authority that boys knew how to do from birth. "She murdered a lot of people."

She tried to laugh but it wouldn't come now. Hard little nubs rose on the lining of her stomach. "You jujube."

"She chopped their heads off," he said. "You don't have to be a genius. That's what they all did, all those queens of England!"

He relit the cigarette. She touched her lips. They felt larger than usual, a little chapped. He puffed but she couldn't tell if he inhaled.

Her stomach was hurting again. She adjusted her shirt, wishing it were winter and she had a sweater on. A down parka with a hood.

He held out the cigarette but she shook her head. He took her hand, touched the bracelet on her wrist. "That's pretty fancy."

"It's from my *dad*. He lives in Tucson."

He nodded gravely. "I love you, Hadley. Do you love me?"

"Yes." She gathered her books, slid out of the car, ran for the el.

With the late afternoon sun bouncing off the white oak top of her dresser onto the mirror, Hadley fixed on the spot where the reflection of her upper body dissolved in glare. Her eyes began to tear. "Bloody Mary," she said fiercely. Nothing happened.

She took off her mother's bracelet, dropped it in the tangle in her underwear drawer, leaned toward her face. There was a gap between her front teeth that would be repaired by orthodontia when her bones stopped growing, the dentist had said. "Bloody Mary," she hissed. Leaning closer, she could see tiny pencilpoint pores in the end of her nose. She listened for her mother's car in the driveway, the garage door rolling up. "Bloody Mary!" The silence was a hole to fall into. Her stomach continued to burn.

On her phone the shape of a ballet slipper she called Rachel. She hardly ever talked about things that upset her, but now she said to her friend, "I have a horrible stomach ache."

"Oh, dear."

"I don't know if I can come tonight."

Hadley heard Rachel's breath going into the receiver. Rachel sounded as if her own stomach was hurting. "Did you tell your mom?" Rachel said.

"She's not home."

"You could call your uncle at work."

"He won't know anything."

"He's a doctor!"

"An eye doctor."

"Do you want me to tell my mom?"

"Well, actually, it's starting to feel better now."

"I hope you don't have stomach cancer," Rachel said.

"I don't!" Hadley said, hanging up.

Her mother's cat Cassandra poked her head into the room, then scampered down the hall. The phone rang but Hadley didn't pick up. Down the attic stairs came music like a boy singing though she knew it was a violin. Nora played first violin in her high school orchestra. Nora had just been inducted into the National Honor Society, an organization Hadley would never in a million years be asked to join. Nora had a letter in track and wavy black hair like their mother's that she cut close to her head as if she didn't even care. The only thing Hadley had that Nora didn't was a boyfriend, a small ascendancy she kept in mind as she climbed up to Nora's room. The door was open. The radio played. Her sister sat on her bed in a T-shirt, jogging shorts and golf socks, a book propped against her thighs, Cassandra curled under the tent of her knees. "Where's Mom?" Hadley said.

Nora scratched Cassandra's head. "Am I our mother's keeper?" "What?"

Nora looked apologetic. "What's going on, Had?"

Hadley shrugged. The radio played sticky violin sweeps, wrapping her head around and around. The words in Nora's book were small and close together. "Children don't get stomach cancer," Hadley said, her voice against the swell of violin louder than she wanted it to be.

Nora turned the radio down. "What are you talking about?"

"I just said."

"No, I mean, who has stomach cancer? Do you think you have stomach cancer?"

Hadley shook her head vehemently. "Was Mom here when you got home?"

"Something's wrong. What all of a sudden do you need Mom for?"

Nora's book lay face down on the bedspread: *The New Testament*, for people who weren't Jewish, centered on an extremely gory event Hadley had no reason to think about. There was nothing in that book that would have compelled her to take it off a shelf. She said to Nora, "I hate our mom."

"Me too, sometimes," Nora said, "but then I think —"

"No," Hadley said. "I really hate her."

Her sister looked at her. Hadley let her look. It was one of those days. Nothing terrible had happened but everything was a mess. More

days were getting like that. "She's very unhappy," Nora said. "Hadley, what's the matter with you?"

Hadley picked up *The New Testament*. "Do you read this for fun?"

"I'll tell you a secret," Nora said, "if you promise to keep your mouth shut."

Hadley rolled her eyes.

"Last month, you know, Mom —"

"When she was sick in the hospital?"

"She tried to kill herself."

Hadley had been about to sit down on the bed. She remained standing. "Do you think I believe you?"

"Arnie told me. She took a whole bottle —"

"He's a dork," Hadley said.

"Hadley, I saw her. In bed asleep. I shook her but she wouldn't wake up."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!"

"You used to cry at the drop of a hat," Nora said. "Now you're just pissed all the time."

"You're the one who *cries*."

Nora shook her head. "You expect everything to center on you. Things don't center on any one person."

"I know that!"

"I'm sorry," Nora said. She turned back to her book, read a few words, looked up with more benignity. "Hey, where did you go after school today? You weren't on the bus."

Hadley, though, had no use for Nora's brand of good will. "I decided to walk home," she said. "It was a nice day."

"Truly." Nora smiled sweetly.

"I needed the exercise," Hadley went on. Nora looked at her. Hadley told Nora about something expensive that Trent had given her, but her sister didn't absorb her words the way Rachel did. Anyway, lying was like potato chips, fun at first, then you couldn't taste. "Forget it, Sister Saint. You haven't the faintest idea what I'm talking about."

"Neither do you," Nora said.

"I hate your guts!"

"You should pray," Nora said like the Queen of England. "It helps to focus on something greater than yourself." She picked up

Cassandra, kissed her nose like a baby's. She looked radiant. The swell and contraction of her calf muscle into her tight white sock intensified the knife ache under Hadley's stomach.

In her mother's medicine chest, Hadley found a bottle of something marked *for pain*. She swallowed a plump red Darvon, counted sixty waiting for something to happen. She took another.

Hearing her mother's feet on the stairs, she made no move to rise from the bed. Outside her window the light had turned black purple. Could she get up? In a fire, could she? She closed her eyes, pulling the corners of her mouth into the faint, pretty, dead smile of Snow White in her coffin as her mother wafted toward her. "Hadley," she whispered, "didn't you sleep last night?"

Hadley tightened her closed eyes, but increased very slightly the arc of her smile.

"What's the matter, honey?" Her mother bent over the bed. "Hadley, talk to me!" She put a dry, fragrant hand to her forehead. "You feel cool."

"I am cool," Hadley whispered.

"Hadley," her mother said, "I want you to get up now. It's almost dinner time."

Hadley wanted to cry. Instead she opened her eyes wide and hard and dry and dead. She imagined her eyes saying to her mother, I hate your guts, you don't deserve to be alive standing in front of me on this planet.

"We eat in half an hour, Haddy. It's your turn to set."

Hadley put two of her fingers in her mouth. She giggled.

"Do you expect to get your allowance this week?"

"I'm eating at Rachel's," Hadley said. "I'm sleeping at Rachel's."

Ten minutes later, though, Hadley walked down to the kitchen and took four dinner plates out of the cupboard slowly, not as if she were hurrying or obeying or anything. Her mother was talking on the phone. Hadley gathered napkins, silver, slowly — her hands were a little clumsy — and brought it all into the dining room.

Then she stopped, plates in hand, and heard almost simultaneously the kitchen silence more potent than speech. From moments past the picture came clear, of her mother on the kitchen phone as she entered

— the quick turn and hunch, the curling tight around her conversation. Holding tight to the stack of dinnerware, Hadley rewound the tape in her mind, traced the moment back, then played it, and heard what her mother had been breathing into the phone, her laser whisper, meant to be heard but not overheard: “I want you.”

With great care Hadley folded the napkins into triangles and placed them to the left of the dinner plates. Who was on the other end of her mother’s phone call. To herself she said, I want you.

At Rachel’s, she was wilder than usual. Under her leadership they soaked May Sun’s bra and placed it in the freezer, called a multi-consonanted name from the phonebook and uttered incorrectly targeted ethnic slurs, ordered Cantonese dinner for eight to be delivered to Felice Barinholtz’s address. When it was eleven o’clock, and Mr. and Mrs. Moss were in bed, and it was time to play Bloody Mary, Hadley twirled open the lazy Susan cabinet of Mr. Moss’s liquor and took out a bottle with the shivery name of Absolut. It poured thin and clear as water, giving a peppery underside to diet Coke. She drank, murmuring *I want you* loud enough for people to hear, closing the downstairs bathroom door behind her.

It was a half-bath, newly redecorated. The mauve and rose of the wallpaper repeated the mauve of the gleaming hand soap and tissue dispensers and the rose of the gleaming sink and toilet bowl. The air was clean and sweet with the smell of lily of the valley. Hadley wore what she planned to sleep in, a loose white shirt and leggings. She was calm in the dark, almost buoyant amid the flower smell, the rosy ceramic glow. On the wall behind her the towel in Rachel’s mother’s rack felt warm to the small of her back. She looked in the mirror over the sink at the vague shape of her head and shoulders, and said almost contemptuously, “Bloody Mary.”

Nothing changed.

“Bloody Mary,” she said, husky-thick like her mother. “I want you.” In the mirror she couldn’t tell the paleness of her forehead apart from her hair. Her mouth was a smudge. She bared her teeth: “Bloody Mary, I want you!”

Slowly her eyes got used to the dark. She made out her mouth. Her nose appeared, small, neat, unobtrusive, a feature she’d never

worried about. *Bloody Mary*. Her eyes she'd never minded either, though they were on the pale side, less beautiful than her mother's. She leaned toward the mirror, daring herself. *I want you*. She steeled herself for the horror, the evil face behind her face, her own evil staring back, perhaps reaching out to her, blackness of inner and outer joined at last. But from her chin to the crown of her head there was one face only, and where her eyes were supposed to be she couldn't see anything.

She leaned farther, her stomach pressing on the sink. Above the line of her nose was a swatch of unmodulated gray. She opened her eyes as wide as she could, swung her head from side to side. Her earrings made pretty, jangly sounds and glimmered where an edge caught the light, but nothing in the top half of her face showed in the mirror. At the same time the pain she had forgotten for the past few hours grabbed the bottom of her stomach. A clot of heavy liquid found its gravity and fell out of her body. Wet to the seams of her leggings, she stared at the blind face in the mirror, exhaling what felt like bits of sand and little hairs that hurt her throat till they clotted into a scream.

"Ha-ad?" Rachel's voice outside the door was worried, tender. Hadley pushed her scream back to where it had come from. She struggled out of her soiled pants, balled them up, toed them behind the toilet.

"Hadley — ?"

Hadley opened, pulling her shirt down over her legs. Behind Rachel the rest of the girls stood in nightshirts and peejays, their eyes stripped bare of their sixth grade cynicism. "The lady with the burning hair," Hadley cried, "she tried to take me!"

Another clot or whatever it was began its descent. On the floor between her bare feet was a splotch of blood. Glancing elsewhere she drew her feet together but the girls stared at the floor. A drop ran down the side of her leg. "Get your mother," May Sun whispered to Rachel.

Mrs. Moss arrived with sanitary pads and clean underpants and Tylenol. She told the story of her own first period, an event she remembered with extraordinary clarity. She and her friends from those days called it their "visitor." "Have you received your visitor this month?" "I can't take gym, I have my visitor." Hadley sat on the floor

on the sanitary pad like a boat between her legs, laughing from time to time in gusts that threatened to divide her from the bottom of her body.

None of the girls seemed surprised by her laughter or at all put off by what had just happened to her. May Sun had been getting her period for the past six months. Sherelle's sister in eighth grade was embarrassed because she hadn't started yet. Her friends gave her extra space in their circle to fill as she wished, aligned themselves on the rug for a view of her face, access to the flickerings of new knowledge her "visitor" had bestowed on her. So, occasionally doubled over with private laughter and speechless for minutes at a time, she told them truths. She was not and never had been in love with Trent Lawson. She was afraid of Sherelle. She didn't mind Felice Barinholtz; actually she liked Felice. There was a central truth toward which she was straining, and she kept on. She had lied about Bloody Mary, she'd never seen Bloody Mary. She told them everything that came to her mind regardless of whether they'd like her tomorrow, but it didn't help. She was on a raft floating out to sea, and her girlfriends' blurry shapes drifted in the dark farther and farther away. Still she kept on talking till there was only Rachel at her side. She told Rachel about the stolen bracelet. With Rachel's ear sharing the earpiece she called Trent Lawson. "This is Hadley. I'm sorry to call so late. I'm sorry, Trent, but I don't love you."

"I know." His voice was soft from sleep. "But do you *like* me?"

She turned away from Rachel, picturing his face round, babyish, earnest with the cigarette. She swallowed before she spoke. "I like you. Sure, why not?" She hung up.

Rachel whispered, "I love you, Hadley. You're my best friend in the world, ever, ever."

Hadley hugged her friend. "Me too." There was one thing more, a last glinty, dangerous, hard nugget of truth. But all she could say was "Me too," again, for fear the look on Rachel's face would banish her for all time from the world of girlfriends. "Did you know," she said to herself, "that my mother tried to kill herself?"

She fell asleep in the sleeping bag next to Rachel, dreamed of an eyeless face, dreamed herself curled at the foot of her mother's bed like a dog. She woke holding Rachel's hand and wanting her mother.

It was two a.m. when she let herself into her house. Her slippered feet were freezing cold. The pad chafed the sides of her thighs. The house smelled clammy with the breath of people sleeping, though it might be the new odor of metal and rotting grapes issuing from the pores of her skin. Stepping out of the slippers, she tiptoed up to her mother's room, pushed open the door.

The hall light was out, and Hadley couldn't see distances — soon she'd sit behind her uncle's eye machine and walk from then on with prescription glass between herself and the world, but right now she was decidedly near-sighted — so she could never be sure she saw what she thought she saw, though in bed afterward she tried to put it all together. Hazy streetlamp light shone through the window on what might have been the rise of her mother's kneecap, but maybe it was an extra pillow tossed to the side of the bed. Someone knelt at the place where her mother's legs came together, or else it was a spill of quilt. She peered more closely, squinting till her face hurt. She glanced out the corner of her eye where images were sometimes more distinct. One minute there was only peace in the room, darkness and sleep, then there was sharp breathing, rising to a squeal. It reminded her of pain, worse than what she'd felt under her stomach (it was gone now), but from which no one seemed to want to be saved. She shook her head, waiting for the image to resolve into familiarity, but it hovered at the edge of her awareness like girlfriends telling lies about her in a corner of the room. She opened her eyes in the dark and tried to see.