

From 4-Ever

Kalifornia July 14, 1999

In high summer with the wind down, the sun stuck on top of the sky, the damp heat all over you like wool, the friends pledge to climb the six-foot Cyclone fence at the west end of the picnic area, hold hands on the tippytoe edge of the bluff, scream "fuck you" at the stupid, ugly, boring world, and jump. It's Vera's idea but the other three go along with varying degrees of zeal. St. John is on the verge of reluctant, Nathan inspired. It's our Declaration of Interdependence! he cries. Vera dictates, and Kay writes it out with graceful loops and sworls on a sheet of her thin-lined looseleaf notebook paper:

We, the undersigned, of deeply troubled mind and body, albeit parts of a nearly perfect union, do hereby pledge, promise, and swear, that at dawn. September 3, 1999, before light from the rising sun hits the lake, all four of us freely, lovingly, joyfully —

They have six weeks.

* * *

Earlier that day, which Kay found, for some reason, distinctly harder to manage than other days, she'd cut summer school. Maybe it was the increasingly feeble air-conditioning in the old building, that let her daydream through Physics but in the exercise class that followed made her hate the feel of her skin. Outside in the heat of the parking lot a cloudy sort of terror flowed through her. She crouched between cars till her breath came back. Then she pulled on her long black skirt, stuffed her damp tights into her backpack to smell up the pages of her physics book, and walked the three blocks to the park.

Passing through the clusters of green-painted picnic tables she slowed her pace. To her left a sandy-pathed woods stretched south down the coast. North, on one of the tennis courts, a couple of college age boys hit a ball back and forth with an amiable, well-adjusted clomp. But the hot air roiled with dampness and the hhhsh of waves, and the constant wind fuzzed all her thoughts, bad and good. In her queen-size leotard and voluminous black cotton skirt she moved clumsily, like an immigrant dazed by the newness of it all. Never before had she cut a class of any kind, even embarrassing, pointless Teen Slimnastics.

At the end of the field the bluff looked out on water and a rocky beach, the sheer drop fenced off and half concealed by a scattering of trees, in the shade of one of which sat two boys dressed like Kay entirely in black. Saint, the larger, leaned against the tree trunk, while Nathan lay on his stomach, chin in hand. From his top of the line CD player came Slim Shady's squeaky voice, the words distinct across the expanse of dry mowed grass:

Hi, kids, do you like violence?

Wanna see me stick nine inch nails through each one of my eyelids? Between daily obligatory inanities this was where Kay's friends spent their summer days — in Nicolet Park, named for the first white man to beard the wilds of Michigan but called by the group "Kalifornia." "See you in Kalifornia," they'd say. "Kalifonia or bust." Kali was the Hindu goddess of destruction; fornia implied, of course, fornication. Death and sex. Kay smiled to herself; she'd known these people for three or four years and it was almost embarrassing how glad she still was to see them. Always, like a curtain going up.

Closer, she heard them on a favorite topic. It was the summer of Columbine, of murders of upscale teens by other upscale teens. Professing admiration for the Trenchcoat Mafia, Nathan called the mayhem bold martyrdom, especially in light of the perpetrators' final self-punishment. He laughed. "'Tis a far, far better deed I do than ever I have done before.' Who said that and to whom?"

Saint, who hated irony — hated all speech and action that weren't sincere and straightforward — couldn't speak for a moment. "They should have killed themselves first, that's what I'd have done." He closed his eyes, extending the pause that preceded all but his most routine utterances. "Nathan, don't be an asshole."

Nathan play-punched his stomach. "You've got to lighten up. It's a sign of mental health."

"So call me a psycho." Saint was trying for gaiety, but his face didn't change. Nathan gave a hoot, though.

"Okay, you're a psycho! Call me anything but don't call me late to dinner. My grandfather used to say that. Or maybe my father just said he said that. I remember laughing even though I didn't know why it was funny." Nathan ejected the disc, inserted another:

I'm so happy

Cause today I found my friends

In my head I'm so ugly

That's okay, so are you —

"You're not a psycho, you just have personality problems." Nathan laughed. "He also said, 'I see,' said the blind man as he bumped into a telephone pole. What was that all about?" He turned up the music. "I love Marilyn. He is so goth."

"Goth? That suburban crap?"

"Oooh, what you said!"

They blew smoke at each other, and insulting jokes. Kay stood perspiring outside their oasis of shade, reminding herself how engrossed you can get in a conversation. Saint had a grave, strong face she loved to look at. Nathan seemed to her supernaturally intelligent. But as their involvement persisted her overload of damp flesh began to weigh on her bones more heavily than anything had a right to. When at last the boys glanced up, her knee gave; she stumbled forward, knocking against Saint. Freudian slip! It was! But should she say it? Would it be received well? Nathan grinned at her, not snidely; Saint helped her off with her backpack. Tears swelled against her eye sockets, and she pushed them back — Kay Hartmann, born Mary Kay, a girl who slotted her life into moments of pain, no pain.

"We're taking a poll, dear," Nathan said. "If you had only one choice who would you execute? We're talking family, friends, public figures?"

"It's okay! I'm early, I don't want to butt in."

Nathan cast a pointed glance at the dainty gold watch on his wrist. "You ditched Physics, Miz Kay. Shame, shame, shame. Angle of incidence equals angle of reflection."

"Duh. E equals MC squared." She tried to emulate Nathan's amused lightness but her voice trembled with the pleasure of being here with them. "Actually I went to Physics. All I missed was Camp Fatso."

"Excellent."

She busied herself. In her backpack she found the cards and the magnetic board she'd borrowed from her stepmother's game cabinet. She unfolded the board and set it on the grass beside them. She mixed the cards. When it was clear that the two-way conversation was done, she dealt a hand of contract bridge, the game they'd played in the five minutes between classes — the pastime, she believed, that had gotten her through the school year. She picked up her cards, flicked a tender glance at the boys. "Where's the Vee? Isn't she usually here by now?"

No one knew where Vera was — the fourth leg of their table. Vera was capricious, that was their word for her, more admiring than critical. You could count on Vera, though not necessarily the way you thought. In the meantime they discussed, in the following order, the virtues of goth, Saint's boss's latest attempt to humiliate him, whether Marilyn Manson was sick or brilliant, whether God was malevolent or merely indifferent, where the h belonged in the word "rhapsodic," and if Nathan should take Prozac. He didn't want to feel too good. It would seem inauthentic.

It was almost noon when Vera appeared. Kay saw her across the field, tiny, fairy-like in her cut-offs and sports bra. Sunlight bounced off her pale skin and her white blond hair but she didn't even look their way. She sat down at an empty picnic table at the far end of the field.

As Saint started to rise, Nathan, who scored low on tests of emotional IQ, commenced a new rap — love was an illusion.

"Think about it," Nathan said, beckoning Saint back to his domain, "what do we feel when we say we love someone? First, desire, right? And we fuck or we don't fuck. And if we don't we're a mess, which some people call love, but is really just pain. And if we do, it feels good but afterward the feeling dies. It might come back, but it dies again, and each time it comes back it's weaker, till it's gone. On, off, on, off, pfinkk! Dead. Like a cheap battery."

Kay watched his face evaluating his own argument. Sometimes it seemed to her she could see his brain working in his face. It was an exciting thing about him.

"Or," he went on, "it's self-delusion. We think there's something wrong with us, then find someone too stupid to notice and we pretend they're not stupid. Really we only love the image of ourselves we think the other person is seeing! Isn't that a little bizarre?"

He was laughing with excitement. Kay knew better than to enter the fray. Saint, though, couldn't let it pass. "No, it's just bullshit."

"Vot ees dees vort bullsheet? Could you explicate?"

Saint's face went blank, which Kay knew meant he was getting upset. He sounded serene, though. "It's just not true, Nathan. You're mixing apples and — and, grapefruits or something —

"Airplanes?" Nathan offered. "They're even *more* different from apples."

"You are such an asshole."

"No names, dearie. Here's my point, in short. To wit. God, sometimes I can't stop talking. Love is sometimes confused with sex and sometimes confused with need. When you find a person you lust after and whose good opinion you crave, you're in big trouble. But you're not in love."

Saint's ears were red. Despite the heat, goosebumps rose on Kay's arms. He was, she thought, her soul mate. "Then I'd say," he said slowly, "that you've probably never been in love."

"Exactly!" Nathan said.

Saint's arms trembled with earnestness. Kay beamed him telepathic encouragement: *You're a kind, honest, wonderful person, don't forget that. Nathan can be funny and he's good at sports, and his family has money but it doesn't always help.* Nathan had scored highest in the class on the PSAT and aced physics in tenth grade, and after three tricks he knew the cards in everybody's bridge hands, but he talked in quips or else elaborate paragraphs. You never knew if he meant what he said.

Her words were so precise and fluent she was sure she'd gotten through to Saint, but his eyes had glazed over. He started searching through Nathan's CDs.

Kay crossed the field to the table where Vera sat smoking a cigarette, her spine straight like a dancer's. Vera was a pale white

blonde, slender and perfectly beautiful, Kay thought. Awesomely, dangerously, even with her one arm shorter than the other, the hand smaller and missing most of three fingers. My polyps, Vera called them. My tentacles. In a good mood she made jokes and waved them in the breeze. Kay sat down on the bench across from her. "What's up?"

Vera blew a smoke ring. Then with the tip of her cigarette she burned a spot in the green-painted tabletop.

"Come talk to us," Kay said. "You'll feel better."

"Yeah, right." Vera tossed her cigarette butt and lay down on the picnic table, her arms folded across her bare midriff. In her sports bra her chest was flat as a boy's.

"Please?"

Vera lay still. Kay walked back across the field toward the fence that guarded the bluff. The high sun struck the chain-link, turning the commemorative plaque into a burning mirror. Kay felt bad for Vera, prone on her table like a dead person. She felt bad for the boy for whom the fence was raised, Randolph Leonard Burke 1963-8, who had chased a whiffle ball — so the story went — off the edge of the world. Tears came to her eyes. Behind her, under the tree, Saint sat in lotus position, serene and blank, how he got when he lost an argument. In earphones, Nathan made goofy faces at him. Saint ignored him or else he didn't notice. Kay longed for something grand to do, an act of courage or self-sacrifice for the world or her friends. Nothing came to mind. She returned to the tree and dealt out a simplified form of bridge in which she and the boys bid for the dummy.

In the middle of the fourth or fifth desultory hand Vera joined them. "So what's on the program, bridge? What a surprise!"

She was sulky but she was there. Kay moved over and dealt a new round: at last a real game. She spread her hand — lousy but so what? Behind her bridge cards she felt at ease, clever, almost pretty. She liked playing even defense, abandoning herself to the red and black geometry of the cards, the universe sketched out by the bids and confirmed by each ensuing trick under laws complex but knowable.

Subtly arousing competition gave rise to a four-way intimacy that didn't endanger anyone. At school Kay earned C's even when she studied, but she was gifted at bridge, shrewd and intuitive, the most desired partner. "Pass," she said, beaming at Vera, who picked up her playing cards with the heel of her right hand and the fingers of her left, movements so graceful Kay caught her breath. She wanted to hold Vera in her arms, cheek to her friend's pale fairy hair. Occasionally Kay wished herself a physical defect, not quite as bad as Vera's, something pretty and touching like a slight limp.

Soon, though, it became crystal clear that Vera wasn't into the game. She made mistakes on purpose, it seemed. Her comments were outrageous or depressing. When the deal came around to her, she tapped the deck against her small palm. "Let's do something else for a change."

"Uh oh."

Saint said that. Vera fixed on him. "What's the worst thing you ever did, Saintly? Something so repellent you can barely live with yourself knowing it!" She gazed hard at one then, one after another. Kay had trouble looking back. Inside Vera's skull a light seemed to be glowing. "Truth or dare," Vera said. "High card goes first." She laid four cards face down on the board.

Kay wanted to get up, head home, back to school, anywhere. Nathan's left eye was twitching. Saint was staring a hole in Vera's face. Nobody wanted to play the game. No one protested though. A game had rules, the foremost of which deemed non-compliance a mark of dishonor.

Kay's card was highest. She took a pack of Lorna Doones out of her knapsack and set it down on the grass. She laughed nervously. "Okay. As you know, I'm fat and ugly. Next?"

Vera snorted. "Dig deeper, girlie."

Kay flung her eyes around for a break in the circle but everyone was watching her. "Oh, God." In her mind she stood on the end of a high diving board looking down on pool water far below while, behind her, faces peered from the top of the ladder. "This is so *gross*!"

"Gross us out," Vera said.

There was a low rumble of thunder. Kay looked up but the sky was clear. She smiled furiously. "Okay, this was last month, the night before report card day." The words tumbled out in a rush, monotone.

"I couldn't sleep thinking about my grades and I started picturing the fridge downstairs and this roast we had for dinner, prime rib. A lot was left. No one eats in my family, not even me, dinner at least. God, do I have to finish this?" She dragged a glance past their faces. "I tiptoed down to the kitchen. It was four in the morning. The roast was all bloody, with the fat white and hard." She whispered, "I finished it. I ate half a rib roast, fat and all." She gazed down into the black of her skirt over her crossed legs. Her lips were cold.

"A hundred thousand calorinos!" said Nathan. "Way past the adult daily requirement. At least it was protein."

Saint hummed, paving the way toward some pronouncement.

Vera said, "Did you rub it all over your breasts?"

"What?"

"C plus," Vera said.

Kay felt dizzy. She didn't see Vera as malicious. Vera challenged them for a reason, to toughen them against the blows of the brutal world. What was wrong with her, that she couldn't take it?

She opened the bag of cookies, pinched off a crumbly corner, savored the buttery sweetness. The sun had crossed the line of noon; shadows were lengthening, rooting things to the earth. But her confession seemed to have stripped her of some crucial mass. The stage set of her life — trees, buildings, people — was sinking down into the ground leaving her alone in a circle of light standing on nothing. She said the first thing that came to mind, casually, "Thanks. It'll raise my G.P.A.," laughing when her friends did.

Sickness, however, stayed in her stomach. Her self-incrimination had been judged banal. Soon her friends would cease their forbearance of her, eject her from the club of their four-way friendship. She sat hunched, mindless, until she heard Nathan's exaggeratedly nasal voice:

"This concerns my honorable brother."

"Proceed," Vera said. "As long as you haven't run it by your shrink yet."

Nathan gave his head a theatrical toss. He'd invented a club called the Vampeers in which eleven-year-old Daniel had membership as long as his daily activities earned him sufficient Vampeer points. This week Daniel stole a fancy pen from Beck's Department Store and cut a swastika in the seat of their father's leather chair and took the

blame. Daniel lost a month's allowance and was grounded for a week. He bore it nobly. His imaginary fellow Vampeers applauded him.

Vera clapped. "Shows a nice sadistic streak."

Kay looked at Saint but couldn't read his face. She felt sicker than before. She liked Nathan. She didn't want to know this thing about him. "Please," she said, with no idea what she was begging for.

No one seemed to have heard her. Nathan and Vera were fixed on Saint, whose turn it was. Then Saint gave her one of those beautiful looks that divided the world's pain between the two of them. He said to the group with an apologetic smile, "I'll tell you about the time Jake and Luke pulled off my pants."

"Oh dear!" Vera said, not very nicely.

"Jake and Luke Whitehead, twins from hell. Excuse me?"

He aimed his smile at Vera, who had taken a new pack of her filterless Camels out of her purse. Her left thumb stroked the lighter. "Go-od! Saint John of the Cross! John the victim! How do you always manage to arrange that?"

Saint's pause lasted so long Kay was surprised to hear him speak at all. "Am I supposed to know what you're complaining about?"

His voice hurt a place in Kay's heart, but Vera, who had a wicked mouth (it was part of her fascination) gave a brief, controlled shriek. "Either you're full of shit, or you're stupid, John-John!" She stabbed the air with her cigarette. "You haven't done anything vicious ever, right? It's always done *to* you?"

Saint didn't answer. Kay clasped her hands in voiceless support. Generally she trusted Vera, whom she considered almost supernaturally astute, but like Saint now she didn't know what Vera was getting at. Saint would ask for a glass of water as if he wasn't sure he deserved it; so what? He was a saint truly. When people messed with him he ignored them or let himself be hit, like Gandhi. Last night in her diary sketchbook Kay had drawn Saint's face in colored pencil, with rays of light radiating from his lion-colored hair, trying to capture the right-angle turn of his jaw that revealed his noble soul. Now she had a cookie in her hand and no idea how it got there. She should be doing something, but what? Vera's voice assailed her, smoky and deep, a forty-year-old woman's: "Do you think I'm a bitch?"

Something was bad wrong inside Vera, Kay decided. She broke her cookie in two. One side was significantly larger.

"Feel free to tell me off," Vera said. "Stop me before I kill again."

Saint remained blank. Nathan pulled up fistfuls of grass, sifting them over the knees of his black stretch jeans. Vera took another drag; her face blurred behind the rush of smoke. Kay ate the smaller of the cookie pieces, seeking words that would protect Saint without angering Vera or hurting her feelings. She ate the remaining piece, drowning in sugar butter. "We don't need to fight," she murmured through crumbs. "We should live in love." She ate cookie after cookie, methodically, till there was nothing in her mouth but pressure and the hum of grinding and a little ache from chewing, sensations that for some reason she wanted to sustain. "Hey, could we play another hand?"

"Kay," Vera said, "don't you want to hear my dirt?"

"Yes. Yes!"

Vera proceeded at first fluently. "Yesterday I was a turd but a self-respecting turd." She flapped her bad hand, puffy like the udder of a tiny goat. "No need to agree or disagree. This morning I did something I can't accept. I don't think I can learn to bear it. That's the truth." Her voice reverberated like a sports announcer's. Nathan sat wagging his foot.

"Isn't that a little vague?"

For the first time in Kay's memory Vera looked confused. Her voice, though, was just as sure of itself. "I'm sorry," she said. "I love you but I can't do this now. Anymore." She slapped her face with the simultaneous palms of both hands. "I've made a decision and I'm going to tell you about it. Folks, it's bye bye birdie. Toodle-oo. Adieu."

Nathan's smirk stuck on his face. Saint's eyes, his whole body, strained toward Vera. Kay was angry. The game had gone on too long. "What are you talking about?"

Vera bounced on the grass as if gravity just barely restrained her. "See ye olde cyclone fence? And behind, ye olde abyss? Tonight when the sun makes its golden path across the water I'm going to climb the fence."

"And then?" Kay's hardness surprised her. "And so?"

Vera glanced out toward the bluff. Kay closed her eyes, imagined people all over the world closing their eyes at the same moment. "That's a terrible joke."

Vera smiled coldly.

"You know," Saint said, "you're only telling us so we can stop you."

"If you say so."

Kay looked at Vera, balanced on the edge of her personal cliff. "Vee," she said, "you need to tell us what happened. What you did."

"Right," said Saint, "it'll relieve —"

"God!" Vera raised a finely-arched eyebrow in Nathan's direction. "Those guys are still Freudians."

"Talk, talk, talk!" Nathan said. "We'll get to the bottom of this!"

Saint's speech came fast now. "I'm sorry, Vera. I'll call the police."

"Thank you."

"Fuck you," said Saint. "I'll call your father. We'll get you hospitalized."

"Fuck you too, Saint! You think a shrink knows more about me than I do?"

"Vee," said Kay, "whatever you've done, it can't be so bad you need to do something so —"

Saint burst in, "If you do it I'll kill you!"

It was a dumb joke but Kay heard tears in his voice. Her heart was going so fast she couldn't think straight. "You can't, that's all there is to it!"

Nathan nodded agreement. Saint put his head in his hands. Kay went on more forcefully, "Too bad if I'm a Freudian! I'll miss you too much. We all will. Right?"

"She's right," Saint murmured. Nathan nodded again.

In mid-smile one side of Vera's mouth began to quiver. She spoke almost meekly: "Then, you can come with me."

What happened next was so surreal that afterward, replaying it, Kay couldn't remember exactly how it came to pass. Vera's offer shimmered before them for a moment. Kay bobbed as on water. Then her mind raced away from the words, the place and time, like ripples in a pond into which a rock has fallen. The wind shook the leaves on the trees, the chain-link of the fence. Far below, waves clawed at the beach. Hsssh. Hsssssh.

"I mean," Vera said with a mock-flirtatious smile completely undone by her chattering teeth, "if you guys can't live without me?"

Nathan smiled for the first time. He seemed swept out of himself, in a rapture Kay had never seen before. Kay took Vera's hand. There was a rush of simple pleasure, as if she were ten years old and a girl she'd liked from afar had just invited her to sleep over. She loved these people. They loved her. God ran through them and through her, a circulatory system of friendship feeding all of them. Saint's face was stony blank but he put an arm around Vera. Nathan took Kay's hand and Saint's. Kay reached a foot across the magnetic board and touched Saint's knee. Sweet tears fell from her eyes. "God, it's like we've already done it. We've died. And this is heaven." She looked at Vera's shiny eyes. "You're crying, Vee."

Vee shook her head. "I can't believe. That you'd entertain the thought. Even for a second." She laughed breathily. "Of course it's not just for me. You all want out, right? You hate this life?"

"Terminal psychic pain," Nathan said.

Kay shook her head. "We love each other. We'll die for each other. Like martyrs. Like those monks who burned themselves to end the Vietnam war."

The subject became death and the nature of the afterlife, and Kay's excitement intensified. Her mother had died six years ago. Kay had often tried to imagine herself alongside her mother in death, her soul parting from her body and rising to heaven. Life was a tub of water in which bodies floated like bubbles. Death was the bubble breaking. There was no pain, just the wafting upwards of something nearly but not quite bodiless. She said, "In some form I'll be with my mother and you all. I don't expect harps and God's throne but we'll be ourselves, our individual souls, I really believe that. We'll have angelic bodies."

"Gorgeous bodies!" Nathan said.

For a minute Kay's earthly body sweated into the spandex of her leotard, nothing at all like her friends' bodies. In a different dimension. But when they laughed, she did too.

Nathan described his own angels — with wings but no robes to cover their luminous white skin swelling over large, handsomely shaped sex organs. These organs were so sensitive they could feel other angels breathing in their direction.

"Your heaven," Vera said, "is basically a brothel."

"With the ambiance of an Ivy League College."

Vera patted his arm. "You should get in then."

They teased Kay about her Sunday School angels and Nathan about his promiscuous angels, then Saint made his characteristic humming sound. "Don't you think it's a problem," he said, "trying to describe something we haven't experienced?" Kay smiled encouragement. Slow as pouring honey, Saint crossed his legs, made Buddha circles with thumb and forefinger. "We should look for the gaps between words — the silence that's more alive and ecstatic than anything we call fun."

Kay nodded enthusiastically, pulled toward Saint in his incandescence. For the past six months he'd been meditating and reading about Zen. Sometimes in her room Kay sat cross-legged on her down pillow facing her wall-papered wall in what she hoped was meditation. Vera lit another cigarette. She blew a smoke ring. "That's deep, Saintly."

"It's right in front of you," Saint said. "Look and see."

"Crap," said Vera. "When you're dead, you're dead."

Some of the harmony went sour now. Inspired by communal love and self-forgetfulness Kay and Nathan were ready to carry out Vera's plan as she had conceived it — *tout de suite*, that night, but Saint decided he wanted more time. He was uncharacteristically firm: Next summer after school let out, if Vera still wanted to terminate, he'd go along. "But this is out of control." He smiled as if he didn't mean what he said, then repeated it.

With a squeeze of terror Kay fixed on her friends' handsome faces. She was afraid to die but all her life she'd wanted to be better than she was, submerge her weakness in something strong, to merge with beauty and purity. Saint's reddish gold hair stood out from his face like a lion's. Sunlight haloed the top of Vera's pale head; already she was an angel. Then Vera's mouth curled as if she wanted to spit. She ran at the fence. The others chased her, held her down. Kay's tongue was rubbery on the roof of her mouth.

It was Kay who devised the compromise that ended in the written pledge. For the rest of summer vacation they'd meditate on the nature of death, then the evening before the day school started, they'd do the deed. At the end of summer. There was something symbolically right, here. Vera mocked but eventually agreed. Kay took a deep, tremulous

breath. "We're going to die in love, which makes us some of the happiest, luckiest people on earth!"

* * *

For the rest of the day the four friends play the best bridge of their lives. Daring contracts are brilliantly made, brilliantly defeated, Kay looking up from her hand occasionally to imprint the day in whatever memory will accompany her where she is going. All the things of the world look knife sharp and glowy as if seen through a microscope – the filigree backs of the cards, the weave of her cotton skirt, the crisscrossing lines in the cellophane cookie bag, the grass so green it makes her eyes tear up. As if she's high, though nobody is today, as if the four-way pledge is all that's needed for perfect self-love.

When Saint has to leave for work, Nathan makes a plan to meet him there afterward. Kay and Vera too, if they can. Saint says, as always, "I love you guys."

"I love us," Vera says.

"We love us," Nathan says.

"Could we play one more hand?"

Kay speaks guiltily. Instead of work she has summer school. So far, Vera has avoided a summer job on account of her hand. Sometimes Nathan caddies at his parents' club but only when he feels like it. But Saint works at Burger King five shifts a week during the summer and weekends during the school year. Kay aches for him standing over a tub of hot grease spattering his large, noble face. "Please, a quickie?" Thunder is loud now, but the rain holds off. She deals fast, picks up a six-card heart suit.

Saint says, "If I get good cards."

He opens one spade, bids three-no to Kay's two hearts. The two reach a small slam. Then, as he gathers in trick after trick, her good fortune augments. In the eastern sky over the trees a rainbow has formed, wispy on high but brilliant at the base, two luminous posts. With proprietary excitement Kay waits for the hand to conclude. But she must have glanced away for a second, because when Saint pulls

in the last trick the sky is blank again. "There was a rainbow," she says. "But it's gone now."

Saint shrugs smilingly. "Yeah right," Vera says. Nathan is looking through his CDs.

For a moment Kay feels furious and pitiful, a child who has just wrecked her carefully executed drawing. Then a song bursts forth:

A hand in my mouth

Life spills into the flowers

We all look so perfect

As we fall down in an electric glare —

The top of her head lifts off. In the apparatus with which she apprehends the world something has dawned, an idea lustrous, redolent, unruly as an event.

She's bad at math, expects a D in her abbreviated summer Physics course, but she takes in concepts in the form of images, and now she feels herself rising into the air. It is *rhapsodic*. She understands how a rainbow forms out of the chance concurrence of multiple — elements — rain, angle of sun, angle of the perceiver — a change in any one of which dissolves the whole frail beauty.