

NOVELLAS

THE BICYCLE ACCIDENT

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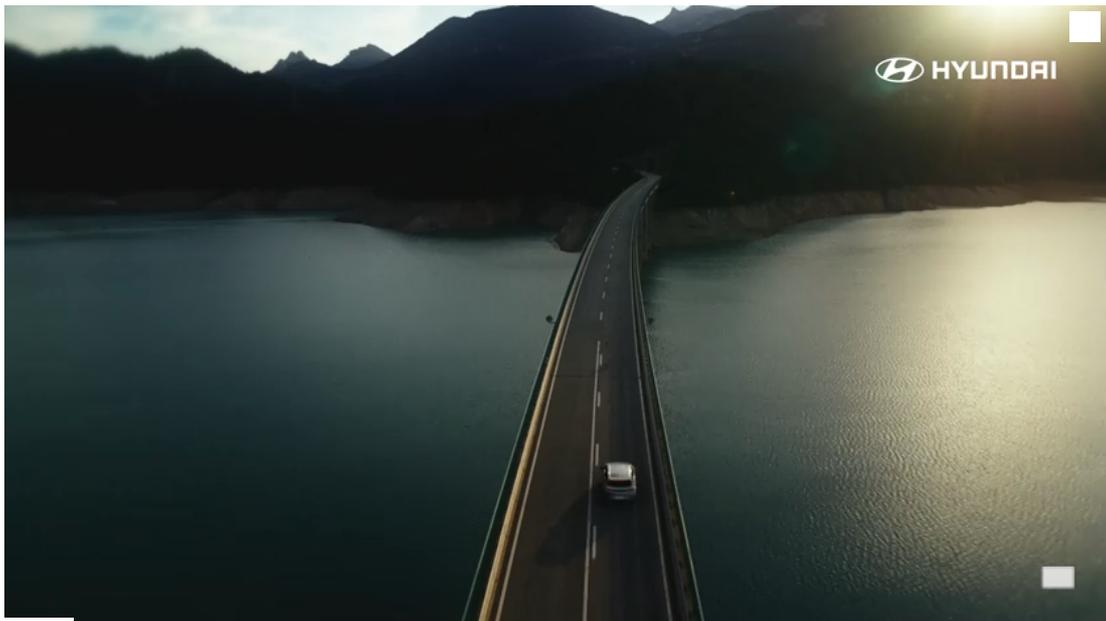
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Illustration by Hokyoung Kim

“**E**vie’s accident with the bike,” they would call it. Or, if a reproach was intended, a hint that Evie had no one but herself to blame for almost getting killed on the Cayuga Bridge and the summer of misery that followed: “Evie’s accident with her bike.”

Was it a subtle distinction—*the bike, her bike?*



Arlette, Evie’s mother, took care never to allude to the accident on the bridge in the second way. She never blamed Evie. She was so grateful that her daughter was alive.

To think that you almost died, Evie, on that bridge! And we didn’t even know where the hell you were.

How could you . . . sneak away like that, without telling me?

That had been the hurtful thing. *Without telling me.*

But she didn’t allow Evie to know that. She wasn’t that kind of mother.

Early that morning, Arlette had enlisted Evie to help her prepare food

for an outdoor reception that she was hosting, to celebrate a niece's engagement. Mother and daughter working as a team in the kitchen. In the back yard, the boys helping their father to set up rental tents, tables, and folding chairs.

Forty-eight guests! For weeks, Arlette had been anticipating this day. On the kitchen wall calendar, June 23rd was circled in red marker like an exploding nebula.

And now rain was forecast for late afternoon. They would be huddling beneath dripping tents, instead of spreading out over the lawn, where banks of bridal wreath and crimson peonies were blossoming.

It had been a season of squalls and rainstorms. Midmorning, the sky was pale and featureless, no rain clouds in sight. But, in Strykersville, storm clouds could take shape within minutes. Thunder in the distance like a sound of rolling barrels, lightning, walls of quick pelting rain, then within an hour rays of sun breaking through the darkened sky, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Since she'd first set the date for her niece's reception, Arlette had had difficulty sleeping. Frequently, she woke from dreams of food, guests, weather. Kevin laughed at her—she'd become so fixated on food. Appetizers, entrées, desserts were roiling fevers in her blood.

A summer buffet meant cold things: platters of sliced turkey breast, Virginia ham, roast beef. German potato salad, coleslaw. Sweet corn. Devilled eggs. Tomatoes. A green salad of romaine lettuce, Boston lettuce, fresh basil. Everything freshly prepared, nothing acquired ready-made from a food store or the farmers' market. The sourdough bread Arlette would bake that very morning; anyone who entered the house would be met with the mouthwatering aroma. A fruit platter, artfully arranged: pineapple chunks, melon balls, pitted black cherries, strawberries, blueberries, raspberries.

Banana cream pie, angel food cake with chocolate chiffon frosting, several flavors of ice cream.

Kevin had agreed to let their well-to-do older friend Rob Nash provide the more costly drinks—wine, whiskey, vodka, gin.

Cassie, the niece, was deeply moved that Arlette was hosting the party for her and her fiancé, though she said, weakly, “You know, you don’t need to do this for us, Aunt Arlette. A catered reception would be so much easier. No fuss.”

It wasn’t *fuss*, Arlette protested, hurt. Cassie’s mother had passed away three years before, and it seemed to Arlette the least she could do for her sister.

Kevin thought that a caterer was pretentious. Nothing got Kevin as riled up as people “putting on airs.” He took pride in their three-acre property at the edge of Strykersville. Bi-level ranch, white aluminum siding, shingled roof. Mowed the lawn himself on a tractor mower. With a chainsaw, he kept the trees and shrubs on the property trimmed; from the redwood deck, built with the help of a carpenter friend, you had a scenic view of farmland, the rolling foothills of the Chautauqua Mountains.

Kevin was a part owner of Ace Hardware at the mall. Shaking hands with customers six days a week, convivial, good-hearted. Nothing *pretentious* about Kevin Hansen.

In the back yard, he ordered the boys around in his funny-Daddy voice.
Whistle while you work, guys!

In the kitchen, Arlette put Evie in charge of the devilled eggs. Time-consuming, and not so easy. Why her mother couldn’t just buy devilled eggs at the Safeway, Evie had no idea. All this work. To prove—what? To save money?

Evie was thirteen years old, no longer a young child flattered when Arlette cooed “Mommy’s little helper” at her. No longer grateful for her mother’s praise. She resented being woken so early on a Saturday. She resented her brothers outside with their father, laughing and shouting.

With Daddy, there was always some kind of *horsing around*, as Arlette called it. With Mom, there was nothing like that. No laughing, no fun. You had to take care not to seem “mouthy.”

By late morning, Evie had begun to grow fatigued, restless, tired of working at the Formica-topped counter beside Arlette, who was edgy and irritable. Evie begged to be allowed to ride her bicycle to the end of the cul-de-sac and back, just five minutes.

“Not right now. We don’t have time to waste.”

Roy and Billy got to go with Daddy to the mall to pick up supplies. They were away forty minutes at least. (Stopping at the Dairy Queen for cones on the way back, Evie just *knew*.) Her father liked to pretend that Evie was Daddy’s little girl, but, really, he preferred her brothers, who were eleven and eight. The way he played with them, rough and growling with laughter, was nothing like the way he’d played with Evie, treating her like a doll that might break in his hands.

It was unfair. Evie was captive in the kitchen, preparing three dozen devilled eggs, which had to be done in stages: a dozen eggs at a time. Bringing them to a slow boil in a pan, making sure that they didn’t crack. Cooling them in cold water in the sink. Removing the shells required precision and patience, which Evie didn’t have, so the task took twice as long and was messy—bits of eggshell stuck to the rubbery egg whites, and Evie had to pick them off one by one, with her nails.

And that was just the preliminary step. Now came carefully scooping out the hard-boiled yolks. Mashing them in a bowl with a fork, mixing in

mayonnaise, lemon juice, vinegar, paprika, red pepper, salt. Then spooning the mixture back into the egg whites, taking care not to ruin them. At the Safeway, you could purchase devilled eggs on a large plastic circular platter with shallow indentations for the eggs so that they wouldn't slip and slide onto the floor.

“Evie! Pay attention! We don't have time to waste. It's almost noon.”

Evie lifted a plate precipitously, and two eggs slithered to the floor.

“Oh, *damn.*”

Half sobbing under her breath, but of course Arlette heard.

“Watch your mouth, young lady. Finish up those eggs and put them in the refrigerator with waxed paper over them.”

The things you hear yourself uttering! *Watch your mouth, young lady.* And your daughter staring at you like she hates you. Problem was, her role in all this was *mother*. Someone had to be *mother*, and Arlette was it.

Kevin was one of those exasperating fathers. If the kids were dogs, he was the parent to let them run off leash, secure in the knowledge that the mother would discipline them and keep them not only alive but presentable before the sharply assessing eyes of others.

“Others” meaning family, in-laws. Relatives. Neighbors, friends, and acquaintances with whom you'd gone to school, whose scrutiny you could not ever elude.

“Excuse me, Arlette, honey—d'you mind?”

Rob Nash entered the kitchen, needing to use the bathroom in the hall. Any space that Rob Nash entered, he took up all the oxygen. Big ruddy face, beaming smile, faded Rolling Stones T-shirt strained tight over his torso,

which was as round as a drum. A wink for Arlette, whom he'd favored since she was a sweet, pretty girl, and a waggish thumbs-up for thirteen-year-old Evie—plain, pale face, hips as narrow as a boy's.

Rob Nash had arrived in his Land Rover midmorning to help Kevin and the boys set up for the reception. Arlette had been hearing his braying laughter out back. You couldn't help but smile when Rob Nash was on the premises. He was a great joker, a teller of tales, brazen in his exaggerations. True, he was bossy, but funny-bossy. Rob was one to make much of you, if he singled you out for attention.

Arlette had a suspicion that Rob had talked Kevin into allowing him to provide not only drinks for the reception but the rented tents, tables, and chairs—if not, Rob had surely arranged for Kevin to rent the equipment at a discount. Rob Nash liked to boast that he knew everyone in Strykersville. When it came to favors, he was the most owed.

Often, Rob joked mysteriously, laying a forefinger beside his nose, which was broad and flattened, as if the cartilage had been broken and had only partly healed. His cheeks were stippled with broken capillaries. You were made to think that you were in on the joke while others were excluded, but, in fact, you weren't really in on the joke, had no idea what the joke was, but Rob Nash was inviting you to pretend that you did because he liked you. Because you were a favorite of his. Rob Nash's inner circle.

Rob Nash had been Arlette's father's friend initially. A lawyer, businessman, philanthropist. (Not that "philanthropist" was a word casually employed. "Generous," "gives away money" were the more likely terms.) At one time, he'd been an amateur actor, the high point of his acting career being the role of the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" when Arlette was in middle school. She recalled seeing him moving about the stage in the spotlight—not a handsome man, exactly, but with the assurance of one. He'd had hair then, thick-tufted leonine hair, going gray at the temples.

Now his body had thickened. He wasn't as tall as he'd once been. He dressed to catch the eye—plaid blazers, floral neckties, seersucker suits in the summer. He had a habit of sagely stroking his chin as if there were a beard there. His speech was liberally sprinkled with profanities and obscenities when he was in the company of men, Arlette knew, but, in the company of women, he took care to speak courteously.

He had been married twice, divorced twice. Arlette had a vague memory of the wives—both pale blond women, stylish. No children. Often, Rob expressed disappointment over this. Life disappointed him. Women disappointed him. But he didn't dwell upon the past. He was a progressive, or what you'd call a progressive-conservative.

It was generally known that Rob Nash had drawn up his will more than once. He'd disinherited relatives who had disappointed him. Kevin knew: you took great care with what you said to Rob Nash even when he seemed to be inviting frank talk, intimate exchanges. Rob frequently hinted that Kevin, Arlette, and their children would be “remembered” in his will. It was said of Rob that he was a devoted friend but he could be an even more devoted enemy. You did not ever want to cross Rob Nash.

Arlette thought this was unfair. All sorts of nonsense was said about prominent personalities in Strykersville. She'd never had the slightest feeling of unease around Rob. He was like an uncle to her. She'd basked in his attention as a girl. He'd given her gifts—cashmere-sweater sets, charm bracelets, a hundred-dollar gift certificate for Strykersville's leading clothing store for women.

Rob had lent Kevin money for a down payment on his Ford Ranger pickup, and he'd helped out with the Hansens' property taxes from time to time. How much he'd invested in Ace Hardware Arlette didn't know, but he'd certainly invested something. Couldn't ask Kevin—that would provoke a line between Kevin's eyebrows as sharp as the mark of a knife blade in bread

dough.

Rob Nash lingered in the kitchen, talking and laughing with Arlette as she prepared potato salad. Rob was a shameless gossip, offering tidbits of information about mutual acquaintances, to which Arlette would respond, drawing in her breath, “Oh, Rob! That is *not true*.” Rob had been drinking ale in the back yard, he and Kevin both. The men were most at ease with each other when they were drinking. Rob’s face was looking windburned, pleasantly flushed. The faded Rolling Stones T-shirt had risen up, baring a patch of waxy-white, slack midriff.

At the other end of the counter, Evie was hoping that her mother’s talkative friend wouldn’t take notice of her. If Rob Nash addressed her at all, it would be in a teasing way, which she dreaded. She’d been urged to call this friend of her parents Uncle Rob but never had. Once, she had overheard a conversation between Rob Nash and her parents outside on the deck, heard Rob Nash boasting that he planned to help out with her college tuition someday, for instance, if she wanted to attend a private university like Syracuse or Cornell. *You both know you can count on me, right?*

Now Evie watched in disgust as her mother lifted a spoonful of potato salad to Rob Nash’s gaping mouth. Was her mother *flirting* with him?

“Fan-*tas*-tic, Arlette!” Rob smacked his lips.

Evie looked away, shuddering.

As if Rob Nash had been reading her mind, there he stood looming above her and laughing at her discomfort. Inspecting the platter of devilled eggs. Evie dreaded him scooping up an entire egg and devouring it, but instead, as if more intimately, Rob rubbed his forefinger in a circle inside the bowl that Evie had used to prepare the mixture, tasting it and declaring it “*délicieuse*.”

“Arlette, you’ve got a terrific little helper here.”

Evie was vastly relieved when Rob Nash left the kitchen. But within a few minutes he came back to the door, bringing his large face close to the screen, startling both Evie and Arlette with his ebullient voice. “Hey! Sorry to interrupt again. Arlette, your husband is sending me for ice. He’s freaking out that the 7-Eleven will run out if we wait much longer. Evie, you coming with me?”

Quickly, Evie shook her head. She wasn’t comfortable around adults. Even adults of whom she was fond. They talked at you non-stop, as if you were slow-witted.

“Yes, go with Rob, you can help him with the ice. Keep him company. You’ve been whining to have a break. *Go on.*”

Arlette spoke pleasantly. Not at all bossy.

Evie laughed uneasily. Muttering, *Guess not.*

“Don’t be ridiculous, Evie. Go with Uncle Rob. He’s been working hard helping your father, out there in the sun.”

Briskly, she added, “I’ll finish up here. You’ve left quite a mess. Go on with Rob, and be useful for a change.”

Grinning, Rob Nash was holding the screen door open. Evie had no choice but to slip through. It gave her a shivery sensation to feel the top of her head, her hair, lightly brush against his brawny arm.

So Evie rode off with Rob Nash in his sporty Land Rover to the 7-Eleven in town. They would be gone nearly an hour, but Arlette took little notice since she was on the phone with Cassie, not an urgent call but a time-consuming one; shortly after that, the phone rang again, and it was a friend explaining why she couldn’t come to the party, sorry for the last-minute notice. Arlette felt her heart pound with dread. *What if more guests cancelled?*

Didn't show up? She had made herself so vulnerable.

By this time, Kevin had succeeded in erecting the party tent. The back yard was looking cluttered but festive. Arlette was feeling encouraged.

Most of the food preparation was done. The refrigerator was crammed. Time for the hostess to hurry upstairs, shower. Change into a halter-top summer dress, white cotton percale with splotches of red poppies, belted waist. Blow-dry her dark-blond hair, which felt like a luxury to her, sensuous, as comforting as a caress. Frowning into the mirror as she rubbed moisturizer into her skin. No mascara to highlight her eyes, not in daylight. But red lipstick to give life to her mouth.

When Arlette returned to the kitchen, she saw the Land Rover rolling into the driveway. There was Rob Nash unloading two massive bags of ice cubes from the rear of the vehicle—one of these he left outside with Kevin, and the other he brought, slung over his shoulder, into the kitchen to shove into the freezer.

Straggling behind Rob Nash was Evie, both arms crossed against her chest, carrying a grocery bag with bottles rattling inside: tonic water, seltzer, a six-pack of Coke. These were purchases that Rob Nash had made on the spur of the moment. “Just so you don’t run out. Better too much than too little, right?”

“Rob, thanks! What do we owe you for this?” Arlette felt she had to ask, out of politeness.

Rob Nash laughed, dismissing her question with an airy wave of his hand.

“It’s on the house, of course. It’s on ‘Uncle Rob.’ ”

He was going home now to “spruce up,” he said; he’d be back soon for the event.

Hard to be a bachelor living alone in Strykersville, Arlette thought, with a twinge of sympathy. Such a *family* kind of town.

Arlette had the uneasy idea that Rob intended to give Cassie and her fiancé some sort of engagement present, possibly a check. And, if a check, a large check. No one else would have presents for the couple, not for an engagement. Rob Nash always had to amplify things—that was his way.

There stood Evie with the grocery bag still clasped across her flat chest. Her hair was dishevelled, her pale-blue eyes puffy-damp, narrowed.

Arlette told her to put the bag down. Go upstairs, take a shower, put on something nice for a change, not those same old denim shorts.

“And be sure to shampoo your hair and use conditioner so it won’t frizz like dandelion fuzz. And don’t take forever, we’re running late.”

Evie let the bag fall rattling onto the kitchen counter. Stony-faced, pushing past her mother without a word.

Arlette felt a stab of dismay.

Never would she have confessed to anyone, certainly not to Kevin, that she envied her friends whose daughters were attractive, charming, fun to be around. At least two of them startlingly beautiful, at Evie’s age.

It was a damned hard world for a girl who wasn’t attractive. Regardless of what people said. Feminists meaning to be optimistic, encouraging. Of course it would help that Evie was bright, but the fact was that no one would glance twice at her if there were other girls in the vicinity.

Arlette located the boys, herded them upstairs to see that their hands were properly washed, get them into clean clothes. Billy with a dirty face, looking like a ferret!

Roy was old enough to take care of himself but couldn't be trusted to.

It was never finished, taking care of children. The infinity of details.

Back downstairs, Arlette greeted the first guests: cousins who'd volunteered to help with the reception.

"You're looking terrific, Arlette!"

"*You're* looking terrific!"

Damn! The phone again. Arlette drew a deep breath, steeled herself for another apology, but it was just one of Kevin's annoying relatives confirming what time the reception began.

Cassie arrived with the fiancé. Nervous laughter, hearty handshakes. The fiancé was taller than Arlette remembered, better-looking. Cassie had done something with her hair, a kind of weird pink rinse that wasn't becoming. Arlette felt a rush of emotion—*engagement, wedding, marriage. Love.* All this behind her now. Just slightly spoiled, like a container of milk in the refrigerator beginning to sour.

Still, you are grateful. Arlette *was*.

Other relatives arrived. As if a dam had burst, a sudden rush of people.

Was it going to rain? Thunder, lightning? What if there wasn't enough food? Enough to drink? Rob Nash would help in an emergency. Arlette could rely upon him to drive her into town to the store. Thank God Kevin was herding people out of the crowded kitchen, onto the deck.

Outside, loud music. Kevin's speakers, on the terrace. Tuned to a local rock station, which wouldn't have been Arlette's choice.

In her sandals with a medium heel, Arlette was stumbling, carrying platters outside.

Stylish shoes, sexy, not practical. She had wanted to show off her shapely legs, almost slender ankles. She recalled how when she was pregnant each time her ankles had swollen. Also her face. With his stiff, vacant smile, Kevin had managed to avoid looking at her, touching her.

In a while, she'd kick off the shoes. After a drink or two, why not? Barefoot. That was sexy, too. She wasn't yet forty years old. Her toenails were polished bright red.

Bowls of nuts. Fresh-cut vegetables, creamy dill dip. Evie's devilled eggs quivering on a platter.

In a snug-fitting blue-striped seersucker jacket and white cord trousers, Rob Nash reappeared, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

A party is like a stream, Arlette was remembering. You are anxious at the start, but soon the current carries you away. You begin to relax. You have a drink—white wine with an Italian label, provided by Rob Nash. You have a second drink. Soon you are laughing with the others.

Even with an overcast sky, the ominous rumbling of thunder in the distance.

It might have been half an hour, forty minutes. Someone called to Arlette from the kitchen. There was a phone call.

“Oh, hell, who is it?”

One of the older women relatives, calling to her through the screen: “I think—they're saying—the hospital?”

“The—*what?*”

Arlette hurried into the house. Blindly seized the receiver.

“Yes? This is the Hansen residence. Who is this?”

In this way, so abruptly, their lives were cut in two. As if with a meat cleaver.

A buzzing in the mother's ears as she hears herself asking in disbelief, "What? What are you saying? *What?*"

Evie wasn't upstairs, and Evie wasn't in the back yard. Evie was at the E.R. at Strykersville General Hospital.

She'd had an accident, riding her bicycle across the Cayuga Bridge, two miles from home.

Witnesses reported that the thirteen-year-old had been pedalling her bicycle rapidly—recklessly—on the pedestrian walkway, where warning signs were prominently posted: "Bicycles Must Be Walked Not Ridden Across the Bridge."

The Cayuga Bridge was a two-lane iron-girder bridge of another era. Vans and S.U.V.s had to maneuver carefully to pass one another on it; larger vehicles were banned altogether. The ramp leading up from the roadway was steep, and the floor of the bridge was open-mesh grating. If you looked down through the grating you could see the river moving swiftly beneath in a way that dazzled the eye and benumbed the brain.

Halfway across the bridge, Evie had to swerve to avoid colliding with a pedestrian, a young mother pushing a toddler in a stroller. There were screams from both the young mother and the cyclist, whose sneakered foot slipped from the pedal of the bicycle in such a way that her bare leg was dragged down below, trapped between the underside of the pedal and the open-mesh grating, against which her knee and leg were being scraped raw as the bicycle hurtled inexorably forward. Head first she was pitched over the handlebars, and she fell, her right leg still entangled with the bicycle, exposing tendons, ghastly white bone amid a gushing of blood. In the adjacent lane, vehicles were braking, sounding their horns. For it looked as

though the young bicyclist might tumble into the lane of traffic.

There was a three-inch gash in her scalp; it would be discovered that her skull was fractured. Her upper front teeth had been knocked from her ravaged gums. Her right leg was not only lacerated but broken, her knee shattered. The sneaker had been wrenched from her right foot, white cotton sock torn and bloodied.

In the ambulance, the stricken girl was unable to speak, to identify herself. Her mouth filled with blood from the broken teeth and had to be suctioned repeatedly. She passed in and out of consciousness, the way a creature running for its life passes in and out of splotches of sunshine and cloud shadows. An oxygen mask was pressed over her mouth and nose, alternating with the suction device.

Medical workers could discover no I.D. in the pockets of the girl's torn clothing. They believed that they might lose their patient before they arrived at the E.R. on West Avenue, but somehow that did not happen; her young heart faltered but rallied, continued to beat. And, after forty minutes in the E.R., the patient appeared to be stabilized.

In a faint voice, she provided her name, address: Eavanne Hansen, 1664 Post Road.

A call was made to the Hansen residence. Both parents came to the hospital, where their daughter was undergoing an fMRI scan.

Following which, emergency surgery to reduce the swelling in her brain.

Later, the parents would recall their vigil at the hospital, which extended well into the next day. Dazed, disbelieving: that their daughter hadn't been safely at home, as they'd assumed, or would have assumed if they'd thought about her, but miles away, fighting for her life.

The particular shock of such a revelation, amid the festivity of a back-yard party.

What? What are you saying? What? These words echoing in Arlette's head for days afterward. Weeks, months, and eventually years.

Forgotten as if it had never been: the reception for Cassie and her fiancé. An event obsessively planned for weeks, deleted from consciousness as abruptly as a light switched off.

So abruptly that the Hansens had left their guests back at the house. Only a few (who'd happened to be in the kitchen at the time of the call) knew where they'd gone.

When Rob Nash heard the news, as incomplete as it was, like a ship's captain he calmly assumed responsibility for the situation, briskly informing the guests that there'd been a "family emergency"—Evie had had a "bicycle accident"—and suggesting that they go home and refrain from calling the Hansens until (maybe) the next morning.

Rob Nash, in charge. Not jovial but stark cold sober, as he was rarely seen. Now that his broad smile had faded, the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes looked like minute white stitches in the skin.

Arlette's parents were at the reception. They would take care of Roy and Billy.

At the hospital, Arlette and Kevin were telling themselves, "All that matters is that our daughter is alive."

Hesitant to ask the doctors if there would be a full recovery. Better not to ask, just yet.

"Some sort of bicycle accident," Rob Nash would say. Shrug of his shoulders, a gesture signalling that, whatever it was that had happened

on the Cayuga Bridge, precipitated by the daughter, it was essentially a small matter, foolish, juvenile.

Soon to become one of Rob Nash's tales, told about town. For Rob Nash was something of a firsthand witness, the Hansens' closest family friend.

In the telling, Rob would not speak of Evie by name. He gave the impression of not knowing her name.

Kids riding their bicycles in traffic, not watching where they're going. Over the Cayuga Bridge! Supposed to get off and walk their bikes over the bridge, but they don't. That age, they think they'll live forever. But you run over one of them, you'll be the one that's arrested. Spend the rest of your life in prison. Well—maybe not in prison. But feeling guilty, for sure.

Rob Nash, flush with drink, intoning with a grave shake of his head as if passing judgment on an entire generation.

Wouldn't think a bike accident, a kid on a bike, could be so serious, ruin everybody's life, but of course if they're not wearing a safety hat, helmet—what d'you call it—which she was not, that girl—Kevin Hansen's girl. . . . Whose fault is that?

For eighteen days, Evie was a patient at the Strykersville hospital. These were bleary, blurry days of which she would have little recollection afterward.

Initially in the intensive-care unit, then the general hospital, and from there to the rehab clinic, where she was first an inpatient wincing in pain when the opioid haze protecting her wore thin, then an outpatient (wheelchair, crutches, walker, finally a single crutch), driven to the clinic usually by her mother, through the remainder of that interminable summer and well into the fall, when everyone of school age had returned to *normal life*.

When not at the rehab clinic, she was at a dental clinic in Rochester, sixty miles away, undergoing surgery to repair her injured mouth and, in time, being fitted for a partial plate to replace the five upper front teeth that had been literally knocked from her mouth.

“Smile, Eavanne! Wide smile! Smile like you mean it!”—the jolly, portly dentist encouraged his patient so forcefully that Arlette found herself grinning a wide clown smile in her daughter’s place.

At home, a rented hospital bed had been brought into the TV room, which became Evie’s quarters for the next several months, those months a succession of doctor’s appointments, blood tests, X-rays and CT scans, fMRIs monitoring the damage to the part of her brain known as the frontal lobe, where the skull fracture had been most severe. In her weakened state, Evie was susceptible to infections, sudden fevers. Often she was prescribed antibiotics. Medication for pain, for sleep. Medication to counter the gastric distress caused by the other medications.

For weeks, Evie was almost wholly dependent upon her mother. Could not make her way to the bathroom unassisted. Could not prepare her own food, deal with such practicalities as bathing herself, shampooing her hair. Soiled the bedclothes two or even three times a week.

She woke in the night not knowing where the hell she was. Night itself confused with day, amid the opioid numbness that was like cotton batting, through which flashes of pain penetrated, flashes that left her gasping, in pure, visceral shock. They could come at any time—she could never predict.

“Mom! *Mom!*” she heard herself crying, calling like a helpless child. For indeed she was a helpless child.

Arlette came at once. Even in the night, hastily, anxiously.

There was a kind of power in this—that Evie could summon her mother by

raising her voice. Evie could disturb the entire household if she called out loudly enough, in a voice tremulous with terror.

When Arlette asked Evie why she was so frightened when she was safe here at home, Evie answered in a hushed voice, “But I am not safe here. I’m not safe anywhere. They didn’t tell you—I died in the ambulance. They were afraid of being sued, probably. I saw my actual soul, like smoke. It came out of my mouth just like smoke. I am not attached to my earthly body. *You* should know, Mom. You were there.”

So calmly Evie spoke, Arlette was stunned, perplexed.

She would never repeat Evie’s bizarre words. She would soon forget Evie’s bizarre words.

The days of Evie’s convalescence were less fearful than the nights. But still she felt displaced, obscurely cheated, in the TV room where the furniture had been rearranged, the sofa pushed against a wall. Annoyed when her brothers wanted to watch their stupid TV programs but lonely when she was by herself; she could hear others elsewhere in the house, oblivious of her. There were friends—girls in her grade at school—who wanted to visit, but Evie shook her head. *No!*

Rob Nash came to see the bedridden girl, bringing a bouquet of flowers for Arlette and a box of Godiva chocolates for Evie. But Evie refused to see him.

Arlette had no choice but to send Rob away, abashed, furious. Protesting to Evie that she was being rude. “You know, your Uncle Rob is concerned for you.”

“Is he!” Evie’s eyelids were half shut. She refused to look at Arlette.

“Evie! What is wrong with you?”

Evie laughed, muttering something inaudible.

“What? What did you say?”

Evie shook her head. Pushed away the gaudy Godiva box, winced as if her head ached. Since the accident, she’d become hypersensitive to light; a migraine headache could come over her like a suddenly overcast sky.

Quickly Arlette had to lower the shades or Evie would begin to scream at her.

Wondering uneasily what would happen if Rob Nash became disenchanted with the Hansen family. What losses they would all suffer, of which they might not even be aware.

Through the autumn, Arlette was the liaison between Evie and school, bringing Evie’s homework assignments to her homeroom teacher, Ms. Deluca, and returning the graded pages. Evie hated how her homework took twice as long as in the past. Her vision swam; her eyes ached. She much preferred drawing in a sketchbook that Arlette had bought for her, with a fancy marble-swirl cover in dark reds suggesting the interior of a body.

Evie overheard Arlette speaking on the phone in the kitchen to a friend or relative, declaring that she’d always wanted to be a nurse when she was a girl, and now she was her daughter’s nurse—“and loving it.”

Evie could detect no irony, no suggestion of complaint—rather, a bright, buoyant boastfulness in her mother’s voice. “Yes, Evie is expected to recover fully,” Arlette said often, as if dispelling doubt at the other end of the telephone. “And return to school in a month or two. Hey, it isn’t easy, rehab. Physical therapy. It *hurts*, I know.”

Unable to bear it, Evie shouted at her mother, “No! You don’t know! *I hurt*.”

Still, daughter and mother were becoming very close. Wet, dreary, leaf-

strewn autumn days alone in the house together. When Evie finished her homework, Arlette allowed her to watch TV in the afternoon, might even join Evie for a while before the boys returned home and the TV was hastily turned off.

Roy and Billy had become shy with their sister, who seemed to like them less than she had before the accident. Though once she'd been protective of them, now she was impatient, sarcastic. Roy resented the adult attention deflected onto Evie. Saying to Evie in an undertone, so that their mother couldn't hear, "I bet you could walk if you wanted to." Evie responded coldly, words of a kind she had never before uttered in his hearing, "You ugly little rat, *die*."

Roy was shocked. At eleven, he said things that he didn't mean, that flew into his head, that no one took seriously. Evie had retaliated as another eleven-year-old boy might have. He wasn't prepared for such a response.

Eventually, with Arlette's assistance, Evie made her way into the sunroom at the side of the house, which was glassed in and heated. This attractive room Kevin had added to the house with the assistance of his carpenter friend. Propped up against pillows on a rattan sofa, Evie drew in her sketchbook for long hours, drowsy from medications. If she lifted her eyes, she had a view of skeletal trees, open fields, and in the distance the foothills of the Chautauqua Mountains. She and Arlette worked on jigsaw puzzles set on a low table beside the sofa. These were large, intricate puzzles depicting American landscapes painted by nineteenth-century artists—Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Cole. Dreamlike vistas, rivers, skies that could take many hours to complete. Out of mischief, unless it was pure meanness, Evie hid away crucial puzzle pieces so that Arlette searched in vain for them. "Oh, Christ! Where is it!"

During these long quiet hours when the boys were at school and Kevin was at the mall, Arlette confided in Evie as she would not have otherwise. Telling

her how, when she was Evie's age, she was not happy with herself. "There was this game I played in secret: whoever was the next person I saw, whoever came around a corner, I would 'change places' with them. This was, like, a wish I could make."

Evie was perplexed, disapproving. "You mean you'd rather have been any old person instead of yourself? A homeless person, someone in a wheelchair, someone with cystic fibrosis . . ."

"Well, it was childish. I was a child. I didn't think that I was pretty, or that anyone would like me."

"What you were was spoiled, ignorant. Trading places with just *anyone*."

"All right, Evie. You've made your point."

Whoever Evie had been before the accident, however annoying at times, this judgmental young person was quite different. No longer a child yet not mature. Her face in repose was peevish, petulant. Her skin was sallow, her eyes without lustre. Hair had grown back thinly over the jagged scar in her skull. Evie fretted that it would never grow back entirely. Other kids would notice and jeer at her; she'd have to wear a cap indoors.

Three times a week, Arlette took Evie to the rehab clinic. The change in her daughter here was amazing to Arlette. She tried not to be jealous of the physical therapist, whom Evie clearly admired, respected. No slouching at rehab, no muttered asides or sighs. Evie obeyed this young woman's instructions as she would never have obeyed her mother's. She was willing to undergo pain for the therapist, to wince with pain, tears running down her cheeks. Staggering to get her balance.

At which the therapist paused to commend her, to praise her. Touching her lightly on the shoulder. "Good, Evie. Now let's try it again."

Arlette looked through Evie's sketchbook. Surprising to her, that her daughter seemed to have some genuine talent for drawing. If she concentrated too hard, the drawings were stiff; but if she worked swiftly, almost carelessly, they were lifelike, inspired.

"Sweetie, what's this?"

A wrecked bicycle that seemed to be also a twisted, deformed, scrawny girl-figure with a (toothless) mouth distended in a silent scream.

A flower opened wide, petals covered in tiny dots—ants?

A grotesque fat hog, sinking in mud, with a face that looked almost human—*Rob Nash*?

Evie was watching Arlette's face, with a curious smile. Arlette turned pages numbly. Most of the drawings, she saw to her relief, were of trees, clouds, landscapes. Ordinary scenes, objects. Kevin in profile, in charcoal. Arlette seen at a distance, through the doorway and in the kitchen, turned away, an anonymous female figure with a conspicuously small head.

You want to say: some good will come of this. There is always some good, even in tragedy.

In the past, Evie had never remained in one place long enough to accomplish much. She'd been restless, jumpy. Reminding Arlette of one of those long-legged leaping spiders. Never would she have concentrated on drawing in this way. Never with such evident pleasure, immersed for long stretches, scarcely glancing up.

Of course, Arlette understood, this was not a *tragedy*.

Tragedy would be a broken neck or spine. Paralysis for life. A coma. What's called a vegetative state.

Of course, Arlette would have been her daughter's caretaker then, as she was now. That would have been her place, her role. *That* would have been the tragedy.

We never knew what talent Evie had. She never knew. Until the accident with the bicycle . . .

Arlette imagined a joint interview: daughter, mother. On local TV news. National news.

Closeups of Evie's drawings, portraits. Such pride in her daughter, Arlette shaking her head in awe, gratitude. *Eavanne Hansen, of Strykersville, New York.*

But often, as if to spite her mother, Evie seemed indifferent to the drawings. Some of those that Arlette most admired, Evie tore out, crumpled.

"It's just something a million other people can do, Mom. It isn't special."

"Well. You are special."

"Am I?"

Arlette tried not to be hurt by Evie's rudeness. As others in the family were estranged from Evie, and tended to avoid her, she remained close, loyal. Often, she found herself trying to entertain Evie, summoning old memories, telling stories from the past.

"It was an accident, how I met your father. I was twenty years old—"

This would have led to a fond remembrance, but Evie interrupted Arlette with an uplifted hand.

"You don't mean my father, Mom. You met a man, a stranger, and he later became my father. You didn't meet *my father*. That's a stupid way of speaking."

Arlette couldn't remember her daughter ever having been so pitiless in judgment of her, so unforgiving. Arlette had certainly never spoken this way to her own mother; her mother would have slapped her.

Still, Arlette recounted to Evie the story of how she and Kevin had met, not exactly on a blind date, but in a way blindly, by chance. It was a story that Arlette had told others, but it did not seem so interesting now. In a TV scene, mother and daughter would bond over such tender confidences; in real life, Evie made no attempt to disguise her boredom, rapidly sketching as her mother spoke.

"So did you win the lottery, or did you lose?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you and Dad *want* a daughter? If you knew who I was going to be, would you have wanted *me*?"

"Of—of course."

"If you went to an orphanage, and there were other girls there, would you have chosen *me*?"

"Evie, this is unpleasant. What are you getting at? You know you are loved. And I did want a daughter, in fact."

"Did Dad?"

"Yes, he did." But Arlette wasn't at all sure. And why did it matter, what either of them had imagined they wanted? The family they had created was the family they had created.

"A female is her body, that's the problem. A man is his brain and what he can make of it, but a female is just—she *is*. People look at her and make a judgment in one second."

Evie spoke flatly, with finality. Arlette stood up and went, all but limping, as if she'd been wounded, to another part of the house.

Each time that Rob Nash dropped by, Evie refused to see him. When the hospital bed had been returned to the rental agency, and Evie was back in her old room, if she heard Rob Nash's voice she refused to come and join the family; if he was invited to stay for dinner, she stayed in her room.

Fortunately, Rob Nash ceased asking after Evie. He turned his attention to Roy and Billy, who laughed at his jokes.

Carefully, Arlette said to Evie, "You don't seem to like Rob any longer, Evie. Is there any reason?"

Evie laughed harshly. "You should know."

"What do you mean—'You should know'?"

"*You* should know.' That's what I mean."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Evie. Really."

"Really!" Evie laughed, then began coughing. Walking away, gracelessly, favoring her right leg.

In time, Evie did return to a kind of normal. She went back to school in January, as she'd yearned to do, but during the long misery of her convalescence something had gone wrong: her friends had lost interest in her, or she'd lost interest in them. They were too young and silly for Evie, or, in another way, physically, Evie was too young for them, underdeveloped, a stunted creature.

She'd lost the pace. She'd fallen behind. Limping, cursing.

Arlette was shocked to hear her daughter muttering under her breath such

words as “shit,” “bullshit,” “fuck,” “fuck-all.” Her daughter!

She tried to take consolation from the fact that friends of hers with high-school-age kids were reporting the same behavior. The boys were worse than the girls—of course—but the girls, too, were acquiring dirty mouths.

In tenth grade, one of Evie’s friends from middle school seemed to reappear in her life—Thalia. Arlette had not glimpsed Thalia in two years or more. Arlette was more thrilled than Evie when Thalia invited Evie to a sleepover birthday party. Evie shrugged. “I’ll go, O.K. It’s no big deal. But I’m not going to bring any damn present.”

“Of course you’re going to bring Thalia a present!” Arlette said. “We’ll pick it out together, at the mall.”

“It’s O.K., Mom. No big deal.”

“You can’t show up at a birthday party without a present. You will not.”

At the mall, shopping for a present for Thalia, who would be fifteen. Nothing too fancy but nothing too cheap, either. They finally agreed on a purple suede handbag with a shoulder strap that had cost twice as much as she’d expected to pay. Evie conceded, “It’s O.K. It’s kind of cool. Thanks, Mom.”

When Arlette happened to encounter Thalia’s mother not long after the sleepover, she seemed not to know anything about it. Sleepover? Birthday party? At her house? Was Arlette thinking of someone else? So far as she knew, Thalia and Evie hadn’t seen each other for a long time.

Arlette was stunned. She could not think of a reply.

Fleeing home, stricken.

Evie lied. Lied to me. Stayed away overnight. With whom?

Realizing, later—*Kevin will kill me if he finds out.*

It was her fault, had to be her fault. She had failed to be vigilant. She had failed to be suspicious. She had failed to ask the right questions. She had not driven Evie to Thalia's house. Someone else had picked her up outside in the driveway. Nor had she picked Evie up the next day; someone had brought her home.

By the time that Arlette dared to confront Evie about the sleepover, it was too late. Evie did not seem surprised to be discovered, however belatedly. She claimed that she'd told Arlette that the sleepover had been cancelled; she'd gone to the movies with other friends that night, girls whom Arlette didn't know, nor did Arlette know their mothers. "It's no big deal, Mom."

"But where did you spend the night? That's what I'm asking."

Evie shrugged, stalking off to her room as if she'd been insulted. Exaggerating her limp.

From that point onward, Arlette knew that she could not trust her daughter.

How heartbreaking it was! The two had been so close during the long winter of Evie's convalescence, when Evie had been so weak, in pain. Leaning desperately on Arlette, as if she were a crutch. She *had* been a crutch! "And now she's punishing me. Why is she punishing *me!*"

The convalescence had become confused, in Arlette's mind, with Evie's early childhood. The unspeakable intimacy of mother and infant. Arlette had been a terrified new mother, unsure of herself. Unsure of her ability to keep an actual baby *alive*.

But infants don't remain infants. Invalids don't remain invalids. Eventually, a crutch is cast aside. No one wants to recall a damn *crutch*.

In high school, Evie's grades were erratic, unpredictable. Her enthusiasms, l

I But she loved the sketchbook that Arlette had purchased for her. When the pages ran out, Arlette purchased another. In this sketchbook, Evie drew penguin-like figures with broken feet and gaping toothless mouths, lurching about like drunken persons. Tirelessly, she drew humanoid figures, clownish, missing parts of their bodies. Her self-portraits were crude, cruel—she gave herself a pimply, blemished face with staring blank eyes.

She began to stay after school, involved with the school newspaper. Proudly, she showed her family a feature in the paper titled “Evie-Eye.”

“The joke is, the ‘Evil Eye’ is meant to ward off evil spirits. But, see, in my cartoons, *I am the evil spirit!* That’s the joke.”

Kevin frowned at the comic strip. Clearly didn’t know what to think and wasn’t sure that he approved.

Arlette stared, smiling. For a mother must always smile.

“Gosh, honey—this is so *professional!*”

Her daughter had an undeniable talent for caricature—which meant cruelty with a comic twist. Or comedy with a cruel twist. Were these caricatures of actual people at school? Arlette wondered. Classmates of Evie’s? Teachers? Or were they just generic figures, foolish, self-important, vain, obese or skeletal-thin, with spindly legs, bumpy breasts, stalk-like necks? One of the females—fat lips, jowly cheeks, insipid little smile—seemed to resemble Arlette herself. And there was the loathsome hog, with an ugly snout face, features so cleverly arranged that they suggested, unmistakably, Rob Nash.

Though Kevin didn’t seem to recognize his old friend. Staring at the hog caricature, trying to see how it might be innocently funny.

“Is this, who?—the school principal?”

Arlette would have winced, except she knew that Evie was watching her face closely.

“This is wonderful, Evie! Like a comic strip in the newspaper. Your teachers must be so impressed.”

Evie laughed, delighted.

“More likely, they’re afraid they’re next.”

Months later, the news came that Rob Nash had passed away, of lung cancer.

It had been known in Strykersville that he had been ill for some time, undergoing chemotherapy.

Arlette and Kevin had visited him in the hospital several times. Heartbreaking how Rob Nash had changed!

His face had thinned, like a balloon that has lost air. There was little joking or banter. He squinted at Arlette and Kevin as if he didn’t exactly remember them, the middle-aged couple who’d brought, to his flower-festooned hospital room, a potted African violet wrapped in tinfoil.

From somewhere, relatives of Rob Nash had appeared overnight, taking up much of the space in his hospital room, and then in his hospice room. As Strykersville friends of Rob Nash observed cynically, they were like vultures coming home to roost.

But would Rob Nash alter his will for these strangers? Or was it too late? Neither Kevin nor Arlette spoke of it: *the will*.

When Arlette told Evie that Rob Nash had passed away, she had little reaction.

“Who?”

“What do you mean, ‘Who?’? You know who Rob Nash is. Was.”

Arlette felt such dismay, sorrow, exasperation with Evie—seeing the peevish expression on her daughter’s face, she burst into tears.

“The poor man! Poor Rob! He was such a loving friend.”

Meanly, Evie laughed.

It was an emotional time for Arlette. Really, she’d loved Rob Nash—as Rob Nash had loved *her*.

No one would look at Arlette again in quite that way. That special way of his.

Kevin was grieving, too. In his stiff, silent way that suggested a deep unease as well as loss.

Where Rob Nash’s money had gone, how much his estate was worth at the time of his death—no one seemed to know. Maybe he hadn’t had as much money as people had thought? As he’d led people to think? That began to be the word around town.

With the excuse of emptying Evie’s wastebasket, changing her sheets, Arlette discovered, in a drawer in Evie’s desk, some very ugly—obscene—Japanese comic books. *Schoolgirls in school uniforms doing disgusting things to old Japanese men!*

Graphic novels, picture books. Y.A. novels with lurid covers.

Elsewhere in the room she found pages torn from Evie’s sketchbook: naked cartoon figures, girls, women, adolescent boys. Some were kissing and touching one another inappropriately, and others were fighting with knives

or swords or undergoing horrific tortures. Beheadings, dissections. Breasts hacked off, intestines dragged out of abdomens. Most ghastly: a fetus torn from a woman's belly.

A smug-smiling fattish woman with Arlette's face, and the caption "Momster."

Arlette was shocked, sickened. It was clear to her: Evie had fallen under the spell of someone at school. Her homeroom teacher? An unmarried woman with hair trimmed so short, it was practically a crewcut? Evie had mentioned this homeroom teacher several times, not mockingly, as she tended to speak of her other teachers, but rather admiringly.

Without speaking to Evie—who would never tell her the truth, and would just try to prevent her—Arlette drove to the high school. Classes were still in session; it was midafternoon.

In the assistant principal's office, Arlette spoke forcefully, angrily. She'd brought Evie's drawings with her, as evidence. A lesbian teacher, on the Strykersville faculty! Corrupting children! Her daughter had survived a traumatic accident just two years before, at the age of thirteen. She hadn't fully recovered, she was impressionable, naïve—just the sort of child to be groomed by a perverted adult.

Soon Arlette was speaking with the principal as well. Others on the staff were summoned, including, finally, the homeroom teacher, who professed utter astonishment at Arlette's charges and claimed scarcely to know Eavanne Hansen and declined to confirm that she was, or was not, a lesbian.

By this time, Arlette was sincerely upset. The sound of her own voice, high-pitched, quavering with indignation, roused her to further excitement; the more calmly the others spoke, the more upset Arlette became. She threatened to "go to the media." She threatened to call the police, a lawyer. At the same time, she didn't want her daughter to be personally involved

—“Evie is too sensitive. She had a brain fracture, she almost died. I just need to know that she’s protected here at school. We need to know—her father and me.”

Though involving Kevin was the last thing that Arlette wanted. Any kind of fuss that might have a public aspect to it, anything that might “get into the newspapers” and be “bad for business,” Kevin would not wish to be involved in.

Following this incident, Evie was transferred to a different homeroom. The teacher was not fired, to Arlette’s disappointment, nor even suspended from teaching, but allowed to complete the school term. She then transferred to another school in the district.

Of course, Evie soon learned what had happened. She was humiliated, furious. She refused to speak to Arlette, even to remain for very long in a room with her. She accused her mother of ruining her life—a life that she had already ruined once.

Evie began skipping classes. Skipping school altogether. She stayed away overnight, over an entire weekend. She was spending time with a new friend, a girl who’d graduated from Strykersville High several years before and was now working at the Target store at the mall.

She left messages on Arlette’s answering machine:

“I’m O.K.—I am not going to hurt myself. *You* have done that for me.”

“You can’t bring me back in chains. I will return when I am ready.”

“This is *my own life* needing to be saved.”

Very little they could do. The Strykersville police listened patiently but never did a thing. A runaway was not a top priority in Strykersville, in the way that an abduction or a kidnapping would have been.

It was pointed out that Evie had voluntarily left home, and was still attending school, in fact. Not every day but frequently. There was no evidence that she was being held against her will. And there was no reason to think that she wouldn't return home. Most runaways did, fairly soon.

Indeed, Evie did return home sometimes, when she wasn't with "J.D."—or with "Carroll," "Ernie," "Smithie." When she was home, she barricaded herself in her room. She avoided the family at mealtimes. She'd cultivated a sidelong sneer—a sneer of cutting indifference. Arlette was stricken to the heart. Unnerving how, if you smile at another person and that person does not smile back, you feel annihilated, as if your reflection in the mirror had vanished.

Evie was well aware of social cues, Arlette thought. She just refused to participate in them.

Like playing a game with no intention of following the rules. Laughing at fools who followed the rules.

Inquiring of her father, "How are things at 'Ace Hardware,' Dad?"—as if the name of the store were quaint, amusing.

At seventeen, she dropped out of school to live with new friends in Rochester, and then in Niagara Falls, where she worked at a farmer's market. She sent a photo of herself in oversized bib overalls, grinning with her perfect plastic teeth, beside a giant, deformed pumpkin that had been carved for Halloween. "Having a great time. Working the earth. Erning \$\$\$."

When Arlette called the number that she had for Evie, to invite her home for Thanksgiving, she was told that Evie had left, gone to Illinois with plans to work on an organic farm there. Evie was "in the wind," she'd wanted them to know. But she would "check back in" when she could.

It was months before they heard from her again. Then, just a hurried call.

“I told you, there’s nothing to worry about. No big deal. I’m going to hang up if you start crying, Mom! *I will not be emotionally blackmailed.*”

A postcard from Denver, the Rocky Mountains in Day-Glo colors, a hastily scrawled note, barely decipherable except for “Be Well! Love you, E.”

Postcards from El Paso, Albuquerque, Los Angeles. Shasta, California.

It was believed in Strykersville that Evie Hansen had “gone off to college” somewhere distant. As, in time, Billy went to the state university at Plattsburgh, by the Canadian border, to study computer science. Roy enlisted in the Army and was away for several years before returning to work at Ace Hardware until Kevin retired early, for health reasons, and Roy took over the store.

B *ecause I died once, I am not afraid to die again.*

Because Death is all around us & in the air we breathe.

Because Death is in the soil, I love to sink my hands into the soil. I love to “dirty” my face.

In the ambulance I saw my soul fly out of my mouth like smoke.

In the ambulance my soul returned to me, but it was not the same.

When you came to see me in the hospital it was too late.

I had died then & was not your daughter.

The cord had been broken, you never understood.

What you believe to be Family is just an accident. There is no meaning in accident.

The envelope from Evie was postmarked Traverse City, Michigan. Inside was a thick swath of handwritten pages.

Arlette wiped at her eyes as she read the letter, passing the pages to Kevin, who was having difficulty reading with his bifocals. The handwriting was slanted, urgent, in purple ink. It might have been a stranger's. She could hear nothing of Evie's voice in the shrill tone of the letter.

It had been—how many years since they'd last seen their daughter? Evie would be in her late thirties now: Arlette had a difficult time imagining any age for her at all.

Kevin said irritably, "Can you *read* this? Chicken-scrawling."

"D'you want me to read it aloud?"

"Don't bother."

"Kevin!"

"Oh, all right. Go ahead."

Arlette read slowly, with difficulty. It seemed to her that Evie was talking to herself. In the margins of the letter were small grotesque cartoon faces.

Arlette wondered if Evie was right, that family was just an *accident*. There'd never been any connection between any of them, and Evie, thrown violently from her bicycle at thirteen, was the only one to perceive this.

"She isn't herself, Kevin. Whoever wrote this, it isn't Evie."

"Who is it then? Christ!"

Kevin spoke in disgust, knocking the pages from Arlette's fingers to flutter and fall to the floor.

Three weeks after Kevin died, and his obituary appeared in the Strykersville *Gazette*, a call came to Arlette from Evie, living now in Bolton Landing, in the Adirondacks—about three hundred miles east.

Kevin had been just sixty-three when he'd died, of a sudden heart attack; Arlette was sixty-one. Not old! Not old at all.

When she heard her daughter's voice, Arlette's first thought came in a rush of hope: She will come home now. She will live with me now.

In an agitated voice, Evie was demanding to know when exactly Kevin had died. Had there been any warning? When was the funeral? Where was he buried? Where were Roy and Billy—had they come to the funeral? In the background was a muffled cacophony of voices, as if Evie were making the call in a large room or hall.

From what Arlette could gather, Evie was in communication with someone in Strykersville, who kept her posted on the latest home-town news.

“D’you still live in the same house, Mom? How will I know where you live?”

“Of course I live in the same house.”

“It’s the same tacky little ranch house, right? With the aluminum siding?”

“Are you—are you in Strykersville?”

“Look out the window, Mom.”

Arlette hurried to a living-room window, facing the road. She could see nothing out of the ordinary.

“Are you here? In Strykersville? Evie?”

“Maybe I’m driving around the block. Maybe I’m stalking you, Mom.”

Arlette ran outside, into a wintry November wind.

“Evie? Hello?” Arlette cried into the phone receiver, which had lost its connection so far from the house.

At the roadway, Arlette stood shivering convulsively, looking first in one direction, then in the other. Her heart was beating rapidly with expectation: *My daughter! My daughter.*

An approaching station wagon slowed to a halt.

“Hello? Is it—Arlette? Mrs. Hansen? Is something wrong?”

Arlette recognized a neighbor. In her excitement, she couldn’t have said the woman’s name.

“I think—my daughter is back. Evie. She’s somewhere close by. . . .”

“Your daughter? The one who went away to college?”

“Yes. Evie—Eavanne.”

Arlette stood in the middle of the road, dishevelled and confused. Her eyes brimmed with tears from the cold wind. In a kindly voice, the neighbor was asking her if she wanted to be driven anywhere? If she had an idea where Evie was?

Distractedly, Arlette shook her head. Adding, to be polite, “No, thank you! She’s probably on her way. I’ll just wait for her.”

“You could wait inside the house, Mrs. Hansen. She’ll know where to find you.”

“Yes. That’s so.”

Arlette turned away, as if she were going back inside the house. The

neighbor waved to her, driving away, but Arlette remained at the end of the driveway, in the whipping November wind.

Feeling absurdly gratified that this was how Evie was described locally—*the one who went away to college*.

At Pheasant Ridge, where Arlette went to live after the house on Post Road was sold, there was altogether too much conversation about “health issues.” Damned if she would participate—she had better things to talk about.

Most residents at Pheasant Ridge were widows. Most residents had known one another in their former lives, some as long ago as high school, elementary school. Regrouping now, those who remained. Those who’d survived marriage, children.

No self-pity! *She* wasn’t one of those who fretted, wept, moaned that their children or grandchildren failed to visit them as often as they wanted.

Though Arlette was beset by *health issues* of her own: osteoporosis hollowing out her bones, bronchitis that left her breathless and weak, an upper row of abscessed teeth needing to be removed and replaced by expensive dentures (not covered by insurance), glaucoma controlled by nightly eye drops, alarming memory lapses, like cuts in a defective film.

Gin rummy, book club, square dancing—graceless, bouncy, joyful, all-female laughter and panting. Three mornings a week, swimming (slowly) in the turquoise-tinted pool that smelled eye-smartingly of chlorine.

Arlette did have visitors: relatives. Her niece Cassie came to visit every few weeks. Fondly recalling “that barbecue you and Uncle Kevin gave for us—that was so kind of you.”

It wasn’t a barbecue, just a cold buffet, as lavish as Arlette could make it, but

Arlette was grateful for the memory and did not correct her niece.

“And poor Evie had that accident on the bridge, on her bicycle. That was a close call!”

For a moment, Arlette couldn't comprehend what the words meant: *a close call*.

Realizing then that Evie hadn't died. *That* was the close call, for which she and Kevin had been so grateful at the time.

“Evie called me, you know. After Kevin died.”

“Yes, you told me, Aunt Arlette. That was nice of her.”

“She was coming to visit, but—something happened. . . . She had to postpone.”

And then one afternoon, on the eve of Arlette's seventieth birthday, in fact, Evie came to visit her in Pheasant Ridge, unannounced.

“Mom, hey. It's me—Evie.”

In the doorway of Arlette's room, an individual with a weathered face, squinting pale-blue eyes, slouching shoulders, of no evident age, except not young: head shaved and stubbly, glaring piercings in her face. She wore much laundered jeans, corroded white along the seams. A synthetic-snakeskin jacket. Lace-up boots. The plastic teeth looked less white, shiny. Lines bracketed the thin-lipped mouth that ventured a hesitant smile.

Arlette stared, astonished. She burst into tears: her daughter!

“Evie, come in! Come in! Give me a hug, come *here*.”

Arlette tried to stand, grew dizzy, and fell back into the chintz easy chair that

was soft and boneless, fitted to the contours of her body. Evie, embarrassed, came to her, limping just perceptibly, breathing hard as if she'd been running. Her breath smelled ashy, stale.

Evie explained that she'd happened to hear that Arlette was in this place—which hadn't existed when she was living in Strykersville. "All there was here, on this road, was fields and trees past the high school."

Evie spoke awkwardly, like one not accustomed to speech. She stared at Arlette, blinking, as if she saw something that frightened her, and thus provoked her to smile inanely and chatter.

"So good to see you, Evie! What a—a lovely surprise! Please—can you stay? We can have dinner together."

Evie muttered something inaudible, apologetic. Shrugging her shoulders in the old way that Arlette recalled with a pang of regret.

What was she doing now? Well, she was *between gigs*. Probably she was going to stay with her friends in Michigan, if she could pin them down on dates.

Right now, she was taking a road trip, a "break."

In Bolton's Landing, she'd had time to devote to her art. Her cartoon art. Proudly, Evie drew out of her backpack what appeared to be an unusually thick comic book, titled "Bitch-Storm-Warnings," a collection of women's cartoons in which work by "E. Hansen" was included.

She'd acquired a national reputation, finally, Evie said. She posted her cartoons online; she had subscribers. She'd been teaching at Adirondack Community College—"The Art of the Cartoon."

"Have you! Teaching! Your father would be so impressed!"

“Yeah, well. That’s O.K.”

After a few minutes, Evie fell silent, as if she’d run out of news. She was sitting on a chair now, facing Arlette, her back to the door, which was just slightly ajar. Arlette tried to think of more questions to ask, things to tell Evie. She didn’t want to appear anxious. As long as she kept talking, Evie wouldn’t leave—would she?

Asking Evie for the second or third time if she’d like to stay for dinner in the dining room. Early dinner, 5 p.m. (It was just three-forty now.)

Evie replied evasively. “Yeah, maybe. O.K.”

Evie asked after Roy, and Billy, and Cassie.

Asking then, as if she’d only just thought of it, whether Arlette and Kevin had ever inherited anything from that friend of theirs. “You wanted us to call him Uncle Rob?”

“Rob Nash.”

Arlette had not spoken the name aloud in many years.

But hadn’t Rob Nash passed away before Evie had left home? Wouldn’t Evie already know the answer to her question? Arlette couldn’t remember, exactly.

She felt a stab of loss and chagrin. The loss of a dear friend, and the loss of the bequest that Kevin had believed they would receive from Rob Nash.

When the will was read, Arlette and Kevin were not even present. No one had notified them. Families close in upon themselves when there is a death. Especially, Arlette had come to understand, when it is the death of someone with a sizable estate.

Still, Rob Nash must have cancelled a debt of Kevin’s, a thirty-thousand-dollar loan he’d made to Ace Hardware. Kevin had always intended to repay

the loan, but when Rob died no one contacted Kevin about it; apparently there wasn't a record of it in Rob Nash's accounts.

Kevin hadn't shared much with Arlette. He hadn't wanted his wife to know that Ace Hardware had required a loan.

Evasively, Arlette told Evie no, she didn't think so. She didn't think there had been any inheritance from Rob Nash, that she could recall.

Arlette spoke earnestly, apologetically. Conversational subjects seemed to shift away from her, as if she were reaching for a balloon that eluded her. She could see it, she could see what she meant to say, but she lost concentration.

"So it was all for nothing." Evie spoke not accusingly but with a sense of wonder.

"What was—'nothing'? I can't hear you so well, Evie."

"I said—'It was all for nothing, then.' That's what I said."

Tears welled in Evie's pale eyes—of sorrow, or anger, or bafflement, Arlette could not have said. On Evie's knobby right wrist, a smudged tattoo of a bird with wide-flung wings and a sharp beak in profile.

Arlette wasn't sure what the subject was. What Evie had been asking. She had to be careful not to agree too readily.

In Pheasant Ridge, the predilection was to nod *yes, yes*, like a yo-yo, Arlette had noticed. A number of the residents were stone-deaf but eager to please. Which resulted in misunderstandings.

Arlette told Evie that Roy was managing the hardware store now. Still at the mall, same place. Billy had some sort of computer-consultant job in Albany. He was what's called a "computer whiz." He hadn't got married. Roy had, but was separated. No children.

Evie shrugged. Her leathery face betrayed no more emotion than if she'd been hearing news over the radio.

“Your father left me the house, you know, and the land, and some part of the hardware store, and the rest of it to Roy. I think that's what it was. He left something for Billy, too—not much. There wasn't—isn't—much. I don't remember the details. You know, your dad didn't want to worry me with money matters. We didn't know where you were, Evie.”

Arlette spoke slowly, as if groping her way. Evie shrugged, her face darkening. If she was hurt or angry, Arlette couldn't judge; her vision wasn't so good anymore, like her hearing.

The fact was, Kevin hadn't spoken of Evie in the years before he died. He'd seemed to forget that they had a daughter. Before that, he'd been furious with her—the “disrespect,” he called it.

In the awkward silence, Arlette heard herself say guiltily, “There is some money, Evie. I set it aside for you. In my bank account. I knew that you would come back—I knew it. It isn't much, I'm afraid. I'm using more of it than I expected in this place. There are all kinds of hidden charges and fees. But I could—I could make out a check.”

“Could you, Mom? That would be very generous.”

Evie was looking embarrassed. Swiping at her nose with the back of her hand like an uncomfortable child.

Arlette gave instructions to Evie to look for her checkbook, which was—where?—in a drawer.

Evie brought it to Arlette, with a ballpoint pen from her backpack, and Arlette fretted over a blank check, uncertain how much to give to her daughter. She could afford to give Evie five hundred dollars—or was it five thousand? Fifteen thousand? She smiled. Kevin used to tease her about

being confused by zeros.

Evie said, “I can fill in the number, Mom. You just have to sign the check.”

Pressing the palm of her hand against the edge of the table to prevent trembling, Arlette signed the check: Arlette B. Hansen.

How lonely this was! She was Mrs. Hansen but there was no Mr. Hansen.

“Thanks, Mom! Gosh! You are very generous. I remember how people always said you were generous. God bless you.”

Evie’s face was flushed now; she’d become elated, animated. She ripped the check out of the book, folded it neatly, and slipped it into a pocket of the snakeskin jacket.

Arlette, too, was moved. *God bless you*: whether it was sincere, or some sort of Evie-mockery, Arlette wasn’t going to fret over it.

Someone had advised her once—she thought it was Rob Nash: Don’t look too closely into the motives of the people in your life.

He’d laughed then. His gut laugh, which had been so infectious.

She sits together, with her daughter, as dusk deepens outside the window. Neither makes a move to turn on a light, as if a spell would be broken.

As years ago they gazed out the window of the TV room where Evie’s hospital bed was positioned, into the distance of the foothills. Here, there is a parking lot, but beyond the parking lot an uncultivated field, and hills stretching out of sight to the Chautauqua Mountains.

Overcast sky like slept-in bedclothes. Comfortable, soft-laundered. Are they waiting for dinner, Arlette and her visitor? The summons to dinner at 5 p.m.?

In her elated state, Evie is humming, sketchpad on her knees as she rapidly draws a likeness of Arlette in the chintz easy chair, her chenille bathrobe loose about her thin arms and chest. Arlette seems to have been exhausted by the intense conversation, to which she isn't accustomed. Her mouth has become slack, spittle gleaming at the corners of her lips. She'd have rubbed her pale-coral lipstick onto her lips if she'd known that a visitor was coming, but she'd had no warning.

As her pencil moves, Evie observes her subject closely. Arlette seems not elderly but soft-boned, tentative, smaller than Evie recalls. For there was a time when Arlette was taller than Evie, of course. Evie had been Mommy's little helper in the kitchen.

No choice but to help Mommy.

Evie has noticed that Arlette seems to have new teeth: artificial teeth resembling her own but shinier, whiter.

On her thick-booted feet now, Evie hovers over Arlette, as if deliberating whether to kiss her mother goodbye. For Evie has decided to leave. Suddenly, she is in a hurry to leave. It is often like that with Evie: her blood begins to pump quickly. She seems about to kiss the soft-creased cheek. Instead, as if impulsively, yet unerringly, Evie's fingers grope their way into Arlette's mouth, gently dislodge the dentures, and remove them without waking Arlette. She slips them into a pocket and backs away then, snatching up her backpack and leaving the room.

Alone in the room, Arlette awakes, confused. Not sure what has happened. Why did the nurse take away her dentures? She is not at the dentist's, she knows. She is in her own room, at Pheasant Ridge. She has not been at the dentist's office in quite a while.

Arlette calls out, "Hello? Hello?" Her mouth feels wrong; her tongue is too big, and she can feel her gums with it. She calls and calls—"Hello? *Hello?*"—

her voice rising in distress and alarm until at last someone enters the room and switches on the overhead light, a short, stout girl in a white nylon tunic and trousers, asking in a vexed voice, “Yes, ma’am? What’s the problem now?” ♦

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Joyce Carol Oates received the 2020 Prix Mondial Cino Del Duca. Her new poetry collection is “American Melancholy.”