

Leaving Ava

This picture has haunted me for years. It's the first time I left Ava overnight since she'd been born, and my father, Abe, is holding her—he's got her hitched up onto the left side of his body and his overalls and work shirt are stained from his sweat and sagging from the pull of her hot sweaty body against his, and they're both staring at me with such intensity, the kind of intensity that I am familiar with, it's the potent currency we all use in my family, that stare that is the harbinger of getting one's own way. Of course, the problem here is that I carry that intensity too, and in this instance, I won out over them, although they had me beat in numbers and longing, hands down. Despite them, I did go away with Daniel, although I was hard-pressed to ignore their pleading looks and guilt-inducing protestations.

You can see here how Ava is staring at me with that incredible pouly face, that face that could make anyone do almost anything to stop her from staring in that willful, irate way—her brilliant blue eyes looking up from the dark curves that surround and accentuate the largesse of her eyes, the winsome, compelling urgency of those particular eyes.

"Mama I need you," she'd said, her voice thin as she twined her arms around my neck before I passed her off to my dad. But her voice was merely a deceptively knit veil draped over that substantial rock I knew was really her, that rock that had held me down and away from myself so long I'd almost forgotten how I felt outside her hot little body that pressed up to mine like clothing I couldn't, wouldn't take off for anyone except Daniel, who'd finally been able to persuade me with his own timorous ways to move beyond baby and bed and house into his arms; to follow him to listen to the Delta blues he played and kept company with.

"You'll be okay," I told Ava, my voice as filled with disbelief as the look on her face.

This picture is clear and strong and you can see my

daddy enfolding her body in his bruising arms; his eyes are also big like hers, but hidden below drooping folds from his furrowed forehead, a forehead that held behind it many long hard thoughts about the weather, the seasons, the crops and the cost of living. His big red-veined nose is one anybody'd take for a drunk's except he never drank anything with alcohol in it, because both of his parents drank and he was left to raise his brothers and sisters himself, when he was only fourteen. I think he looks like he does because he'd seen too many scorching days in the fields without a hat and has spent too many nights up, insomniac, reading Dickens and Emerson and Thoreau.

Now he's looking at me with measured resignation and they're both imploring me to stay, yet their bodies tell me by the way they are sinking into each other that they knew I was leaving anyway, and none of us knew exactly when I'd return, although I'd promised Sunday, just two long days away.

Already Ava felt I couldn't be completely trusted, despite the fact that I'd nursed her longer than anyone I know had ever heard of—a little over four years—although by that time it was more for comfort than milk; I'd never left her for a whole night because I knew that without me she couldn't, wouldn't fall asleep.

I deluded myself into believing I'd always been there for her, I but the truth is that I know she spent some trying times with me showing up at day care much later than I'd promised, or arriving to pick her up late at night when she was next door at Annie and Bob's while I was working at the bar. Now I can see clearly that she must have gone to great difficulty to rouse me too many mornings when I overslept in the hot bright light that streamed in through the window across the double bed we usually shared with each other, covered in quilts my grandmother stitched by hand. I was slow to move no matter how hard Ava pulled at me to get out of bed, because the sordid truth of it is that the alcoholism gene runs rampant through me and by then I tended to drink too much wine and sleep too late. I chalked the drinking up to loneliness and justi-

fied it as the means to keeping me home with Ava, numbing me from my own insatiable desires to be involved with a man.

Here you can see Ava and Abe standing together in front of Abe's truck, and as usual, it's covered with mud and slime from his driving through shallow creeks that lead up to the farmhouse he insisted on continuing to live within, despite the fact that he finally had more than enough money to move away, to leave the weather-beaten leaning sparse home, filled with hand-me-down housewares and furniture wrought from burlwood and bent-trees, to live in town. But he always refused, he said he was obliged to stay nearby where my mother Lorraine was buried in the cemetery up the hill behind the house under a weeping willow tree. He couldn't stand the thought of being in a new place, a place smelling of plywood and new paint, a place with clear-cut corners and matching appliances, a shining new place where Lorraine never lived.

My father loved to have Ava over for breakfast with him—it gave him the chance to make omelettes just the way she liked them—soft with shredded cheese and bacon mounded in the middle like a mountain, with edges drooping over buttered toast points angling out the sides like darkened cliffs with the crusts cut off.

"I'm the queen," she'd announce imperiously, waving her fork in the air, and my father invariably turned and bowed toward her majestically, acknowledging her as the newly crowned despot of the known universe. As for me, she kept her distance during the day, she knew I wasn't as eager to grant her the keys to the kingdom as he was because back then I was still fighting hard to hold the spot for myself. One way she had of keeping me off balance was by insisting I guess who she was as she mysteriously tapped one invisible red shoe as Dorothy on the counter, or one invisible glass slipper on the refrigerator as Cinderella. That way I was always one step behind her, one pace off the necessary course.

As long as I was kept unbalanced, still trying to come to terms with some elliptical tilt in the power between us as it

played out in every known arena, she held the trump card; she was the princess, she was the novelty, the one with the most unblemished beauty and knowledge and the magical ability to rule the fucked-up kingdom of our lives as one renegade albeit savvy, prescient operator who dictated the boundaries and ground between those boundaries that I was permitted to cross. If I was stupid enough to misperceive who she was on any given day, I wouldn't have the chance for a reprieve until her bedtime, when I was granted the renewed opportunity to approach her with just the right story or received the accepting nod from her highness which allowed me to favor her with the seduction of a much-loved song. My father was exempt from these tests meted out by Ava, and basked, fully loved and appreciated in the realm surrounding my girl.

I'd been steeped in the lore of Ava's childhood, seeking latter-day honor, paying penance for all the years I spent before her birth cosying up to errant cowboys who didn't give a damn about themselves or anybody else. Since Ava, I'd been a postulate in the house of childhood, nursing her on demand, keeping a silent vigil against the dark things that could go bump in the night and frighten her from her waking dream of contentment and care.

I hadn't done a damn thing for myself for over four years, except drink. At the time, I didn't see it for the selfish indulgence it was. I let myself be completely bewitched by Ava's startling beauty and intellectual prowess, and cowed by the omnipresence of my own infidelities; I remained asleep in the lulling slumber of her magical babyhood and reveled in the relief I'd felt from being loosened by the bonds of her demonic father's grasp.

When Charlie and I met, we were a perfect fit; he was charmer and I was a gullible fool.

"Why of course I love you, darling," he'd drawl, coming home in the early morning, smelling like scotch and somebody else's perfume.

He conned me into believing he loved me and played so

perfectly into my need to be touched, to be held and to be made love to that I was blind to the sadistic pleasure he took in playing me against others, in playing me against myself.

By the time he left, shortly after Ava's birth, saying, "I didn't bargain for two of you," it didn't take me long to realize I was more than relieved to see him go, despite the fact I'd been left alone with a baby and had no visible means of support; by then Ava already held me firmly under her spell.

Early on, Charley'd been kind and sung sweet strong lulling songs he insisted he'd written for me, as his fingers danced across the strings of his acoustic guitar. Of course, after he left, I found copies of those same songs and many others, written on lined notebook paper, wadded up into clumps that were piled on top of one another in the back of the front hall closet. The writing was heavy and dark, and each page was dated long before we met and dedicated to other women with names like Bambi, Tammi, and Sandy Lee.

I'd been four years without a man when I met Daniel. Out of the darkness of a late August afternoon Daniel strode into the bar where I worked and asked for a Wild Turkey, neat. An unusual drink to request in a hick cowboy bar. Especially in the brilliant dead heat of a hot summer afternoon. But there he stood, nonetheless, looking cool and self-possessed while I calmly pulled a bottle of Wild Turkey from the glass shelf that rimmed the mirrored back wall and poured him more than two fingersful, keeping my eyes on the hard line of his mouth and trying my best to ignore the softness reflected in his green eyes as he watched me, his eyes bold and clear, while I poured his drink.

It was one of those times when I felt like I was meeting somebody I already knew, one of those infrequent moments when it seemed I was just picking up in the middle of a conversation that had been going on before me and would continue long after I was gone, because it was so elemental and encompassed so much truth that I couldn't cut it down to fit the smallness I pretended to hold in the curve of a sentence or the weight of a single word.

After I poured his drink and set a wooden bowl filled with pretzels in front of his hands, those strong hands with long fingers that looked like they could play a piano or anything else that needed a deliberate and soft touch, I looked into his eyes, his sea green eyes, and felt myself falling so fast and so far into the depths he offered, depths so much wider and deeper than the baby-minding miasma I'd been used to falling within, that I was shocked, startled by something so firm and hard and concrete, something so divergent from what I was accustomed to.

"I've been looking for you," he said with such familiar ease it was like we'd been unnaturally parted and he'd been seeking me ever since.

"Well I've been right here all along," I answered back fast as I could, a chiding note in my reply—as if he'd always known where I was but had just refused to come in. He turned and walked to the juke box, dropped in three quarters and stood with his back to me for the opening riff of B. B. Kings' HUMMINGBIRD.

I love B.B., and when Daniel turned, singing along in the deepest syrupy-est voice I'd heard, I thought to myself, "damn, another fucking musician who'll probably play you like the fool you are." But the pull to have that voice singing in my ear and to see if his body felt as familiar as it looked overrode my typically meager cache of inhibitions, and I went to him when he preferred his hand to me. We danced and danced between the empty tables. He spun me around in circles until I was pleasantly dizzy, and I drifted through that song and the next two he'd punched in, until in the middle of the third song when Les came out from his lair in the kitchen and gave a few catcalls to make me turn around.

"It's almost time for everybody else's happy hour, so you'd better get back behind the bar and look like you're here for pouring drinks, instead of having your own private one with someone we don't even know."

"Speak for yourself, Les," I said to him, letting go of Daniel and reluctantly returning to my work station. "I know

him just fine.”

Daniel grinned at me, such a wide slice of a grin it made me think of the happiness I feel when I see a cool chunk of watermelon, dotted with shiny black seeds, just beckoning me to bite into it and slurp the sweet juice after it sprays all over my face.

“I get off at eight,” I told him, easily forgetting my plans to take Ava to the drive-in movie that night.

By the time he returned to the bar, the evening crowd was in full swing and the beer-drenched room was filled with smoke and clatter, the all-too familiar sounds of rockabilly music, conversation and laughter that intensified as the time went on. He’d showered and put on a freshly pressed denim shirt and chinos, and I was sure that everyone quieted down and stared as he walked through the door, right to me. It’s something to do with growing up and living in the same small town that made me feel I was always being watched, and wondered about. I told myself that it could just be my own selfish attitude, thinking that anybody gives a damn what I do, but deep down I knew I was right, so I shook my hair back like a mare shaking her mane in the first warm breezes of the spring, and said, “hey stranger,” loud enough for everybody else to hear me, too. He looked even better than I’d remembered with his hair dark and straight like a Cherokee’s, his eyes such an opaque emerald they made me think of deep seas, of fathoms of increasing darkness filled full of hidden treasure.

When I remember that first night with Daniel I see the two of us seated in a back booth, the black naugahyde a contrasting backdrop to me clasping a carafe of Chardonnay with both hands, and him sipping more amber whiskey from a Libby’s glass. We talked and drank for hours, gliding over the surfaces of our histories—his years as a musician and sometimes woodworker/carpenter, my life with Ava and the emptiness I’d felt before and during those numbing years—yet at the same time, we were having an entirely different conversation with our bodies, leaning closer and closer into each other,

thighs touching, never pulling our gazes away from the others' eyes. Finally I was jarred out of my stupor by the sudden silence surrounding me; everyone else had gone home for the night and Les was sweeping the floor, giving me paternal glances.

"Oh my god, I forgot about Ava," I remembered, the thought streaming through my head like a fleeting sentence overlaying an unusual dearth of maternal concern. "Oh well, she's with my dad at my house, and they're probably both asleep by now." I was fooling myself, hoping for once Ava'd fall asleep without me lying down next to her, rubbing her hands, her face, telling her stories starring herself earlier that day. Of course, by the time Daniel and I returned to my house, the sound of his car crunching over the rocks in the driveway prompted the immediate flinging aside of the living room curtains and Ava's round face peered out, her hands pressed against the window, her nose shoved up so close to the glass she looked deformed. By the damp fog spreading across the window I could tell she was breathing hard, and had been crying.

"Shit," I muttered, clambering out of Daniel's Jeep. Daniel sat behind the wheel, waiting for my cue. "Come on in and meet the princess," I implored, stunned by my own neediness, comforted by his easy smile.

The door burst open and Ava ran out to me, her thin cotton nightie a billowing swirl surrounding her.

"We were supposed to go to the movies," she wailed, taking a running jump into my arms, clinging to me like a baby monkey.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," I began before she drew her face back from mine and wrinkled her nose. "Yucky—you smell like wines," she complained. I glanced helplessly at Daniel, worrying he'd be scared off by the intensity between the two of us.

I needn't have been. He casually bent down and picked up a chunk of wood from the ground, broken from a heavy tree branch during a recent storm. He held the gnarled remnant up so it was in line with the moon, as if inspecting it in the numinous light for possible flaws.

“Perfect.” He said.

Ava turned her face away from me to stare at Daniel.

“Who’s him?” She asked.

“The magic man,” he replied.

“What magic?” She pushed off me and slid down my body until her bare feet touched ground. She walked over to him, mirroring the surety of knowing I’d felt for him myself, and Ava was not one to talk to strangers, much less acknowledge they existed.

“Let’s go inside and I’ll show you magic,” he replied.

She put her hand in his and pulled him towards the house.

“Now, magic now,” she insisted.

In shock over Ava’s uncommon friendliness I followed silently behind.

Once inside, Ava directed him to the sofa and plunked herself down so close to him she was nearly in his lap. It didn’t take her long to find her rightful place, propped against his chest like she was lounging back into a cozy chair.

Daniel pulled a knife out of his jacket pocket and opened the blade pointing it away from Ava with such deliberate care I wondered if he had children of his own lurking somewhere in his background. I mentally filed away the intention to ask him that later, along with plenty of other questions that were dancing around in my mind.

How could a virtual stranger seduce both Ava and me readily, without any apparent force of will? I’d only known men who threw their weight around like they were keeping the earth’s gravity at it’s set pull. Although I’d often wondered at my inability to attract men who maintain the same calm quietude as my father so doggedly displayed, long ago I’d resigned myself to a life littered with lying rogues.

Daniel gave Ava a serious look, one of respectful consideration before saying, “I’ll bet you’d like me to carve a small dog, preferably one that would be named something like . . . oh, maybe . . . Toto.”

Ava shot me a glance filled with such reverence and awe

that I knew he'd won her over, and had the fleeting thought that now she'd feel as inclined to follow him home as I did myself.

As Daniel quickly whittled a minimal amount of shavings from the wood, creating an exact replica of Dorothy's little dog, I tried to fill my mind with cautionary tales, frightened by the ease with which he was quickly settling into our private selves.

I'd been correct in anticipating that my dad would be asleep when we returned; he was snoring loudly from behind the closed guest room door. I was more than surprised when it only took Daniel saying, "Ava, it's time you joined your Grandpa in dreamland," for her to jump up and say, "okay, will you tuck me in?" I watched her, amazed, as she scampered off, carrying her new Toto in one hand and pulling Daniel with the other, towards her seldom-used bedroom.

When he returned, less than ten minutes later, I was bewildered; Ava's bedtime rituals typically lasted an hour if not two and upon occasion, after a night like tonight, I would have been snuggled up to her humming songs, murmuring stories until the sun came up.

"Good kid," he said, settling down next to me on the sofa. He put his arm around me and pulled me close. I was drunk all over again sinking into his touch. The giddy way I felt melting into him made me ask him to spend the night without thinking; I was so completely suffused with longing I couldn't bear for him to leave.

"I was hoping you'd ask," he said and grinned that knowing grin that later, as I got to know him better, I found as infuriating as it was endearing because it acknowledged he knew the power he wielded over me with such a gentle hand.

Those first few hours together in bed still stand out in my mind as the most intense I'd ever had. As the dark night sky began to lighten I finally felt sated and ready for sleep, but Daniel pulled me up against a pile of pillows he'd bunched against the headboard and turned to me with a serious look on his face. My stomach spun for a sickening moment—anxiety is

always a close companion of mine. What I feared was so far from the truth that when he said, "I have to go north for the next few days to play a couple of gigs, and I'd like you to come along," it took me at least a full minute to hear his request. I expected a gentle but firm loosening of the ties that were already beginning to bind me to him, bind me much more than I wanted to admit.

Although I felt drawn to shout "yes" to his invitation with everything in me that was open to him, I also felt a dreadful fear over leaving Ava behind; since we'd never been separated for a night, I was terrified I'd destroy the luxury we wallowed in from our primitive bond.

"I'm afraid to leave Ava," I whispered, unwilling to hear the desperation I felt.

"She'll be fine and it'll do you more good than you can imagine; believe me, I know. It's dangerous for you to be that close to her; one way or another she'll leave you and if you're as tied to her then as you are now, you'll find yourself reeling head over heels."

I wanted to go with him so much, and yet my reluctance to leave Ava felt like a stone in my heart so big I could barely breathe.

"I'd like to go with you," I finally admitted, and by merely doing so, felt overwhelmed by superstitious fears for Ava's safety until my return.

Since I'd promised to go with him, and desperately wanted to, the next morning found me feeling fluttery and anxious as I gathered a pile of clothes together to throw into my bag and called Les to tell him I was taking my overdue vacation time and would let him know when I returned; at that point I still thought I'd only be gone for a couple of days. Once I was in the kitchen I chattered endlessly about nothing to Daniel, Ava and my dad as I piled the trestle table high with plates of blueberry pancakes, sliced fruit, eggs, bacon and hash browns. I was succumbing to the belief that if I was the very best mother, evidenced by preparing the most delectable breakfast I could,

no harm could come to Ava while I was gone.

It was the morning of the first day after I met Daniel that I went away with him and left Ava with my father, full of promises for my speedy return. Another superstitious fear—that I may never see Ava and my father again—pounded so hard in my head it hurt, and led me to snap that famous picture of my dad holding Ava as he leaned against his truck with the two of them looking so abject, so resigned, before we drove off. Of course, knowing me as well as they did, they were right to be suspicious, to doubt my intention to return on time, and the truth of it is that it was nearly ten days before I finally returned home. By the time I did, irrevocable shifts between all of us had taken place and what had up until that time been my worst fear really did come true; after that, things between Ava and me were never really the same.

After we pulled out of the driveway, Daniel reached out for one of my hands and clasped it loosely in his own. “You’re going to be all right without Ava,” he reassured me, knowing I was nearly going out of my mind.

“But will she be all right without me?” I heard myself wail in a whiny voice so out of character for me I thought it must be coming from a lonesome fool hollering to herself as she passed by in another car with the windows rolled down.

“We can’t really protect our children from danger, no matter how hard we trick ourselves into believing we can,” Daniel said, and for the first time I sensed a distance in him, a hard place cordoned off by pain. Before I could ask him why he seemed to know so much about love and loss with children, *Muddy Waters* began singing the blues on the radio and Daniel chimed in with such a deep charming voice that I was mesmerized, once again, by watching him, by sinking into his seductive voice. Daniel’s allure was so potent that I could momentarily forget my worries about Ava, the only other person I’d so completely lost myself within.

It seemed to be moments later I found myself seated at a small round table gazing into a flickering flame encased by the

mesh-covered candle holder that I'd pulled from the middle of the table, close to myself, directly under my eyes; my hands clung to it despite the heat, the potential to burn. I was waiting for Daniel to appear on the small stage directly in front of me.

I was gratified to hear the response from the tightly-packed crowd in the small club in Detroit when Daniel's name was called; I could tell he was a familiar favorite among the people who had obviously come there to hear him play and sing.

During the middle of his first set, Daniel stopped for a moment and said, "I've written a song for my new muse; Lorelei, would you please stand up so everyone can see why I'm so inspired?" My legs were shaky and I felt like I might faint, but I stood up, bracing myself against the table. There was a lot of foot-stomping and cheering and I knew it was really for Daniel, not for me.

When he said, "this is so new I haven't been able to write it down," and then began to sing, "you're the muse I've known all along, now the blues've left me, now the blues are gone. Now I can see you, I've got you by my side, now I know you, I'll never let you hide, no more, uhuhnn uhuhnn, no more." He sang in his sexy voice so liquid I sunk into it like I was diving deep into a pool of cool water on a hot day; and was enchanted all over again. The room held such an expectant hush that it seemed people imagined if they were quiet enough that Daniel's private thoughts could be heard as well as the words he sang. I'd never seen such a reaction to a singer in a bar, and I was to see a repeat of that same effect night after night, as we traveled around the Midwest, going to clubs where Daniel was clearly a familiar and much-loved entertainer. He's always been more than merely an entertainer, he exudes such seductive warmth and strength that it's like sitting in the living room of someone with such charisma and charm that it seems he's singing songs he intuitively pulls out of the air to suit the unspoken longings of his fortunate guests. Clearly I was already completely in his thrall.

We drove the highway to Chicago after the show; Daniel

said whenever possible he likes to wake up in the city where he's going to work later that night. When we finally got to our hotel room it was three o'clock and the spell I'd been under with Daniel broke apart for me, as I began to worry about Ava. I was afraid she couldn't, wouldn't go to sleep and would feel abandoned, unloved by me.

Daniel walked out of the bathroom and took one look at me, lying across the goldflecked green bedspread and said, "why don't you call and make sure she's all right?" I loved it that he knew what I was thinking and so readily understood my need for her; it made me feel safe. He handed the phone to me and I punched in the familiar number. My father answered the phone and said, "she's not asleep, she's lying right here next to me; I'll hand the phone over to her." His voice held such tired relief that I'd called, I knew he was having a hard time with her.

Ava was silent when I said, "hey pumpkin, its me." After a few more beats of silence, I continued having a one-sided conversation. "I miss you babe, and I'll be home soon. I called to say goodnight and tell you I love you." More silence. "Ava can you tell me what's going on?" I implored. Silence again. "I know Grampa is taking good care of you and you can tell me about all the new things you've done together when I get home."

"Come now," she whispered in such a baby voice I felt frightened.

"I can't, sweetie, I'm too faraway. You go to sleep and wake up to the sunshine and I'll be back soon."

"Story," she whispered, her voice the same.

I leaned back against the pillows Daniel plumped up behind my head for me and took a gulp of the red wine he'd poured in a glass found next to the ice container, on the faux wood desk.

"Okay, once there was a princess who ruled the world along with her mother, the queen. One day the queen had to go away on a quest, and she left the princess in charge with her

grandpa for just a few days. He was the king who used to rule the kingdom before the queen grew up and could do it herself

When I finished the story I heard her sigh on the other end of the phone.

"It didn't work, mama," she whispered and I knew she wasn't okay.

"Gotta go babe," I said, downing more wine while Daniel ran his hand along my leg, nearly burning me with his touch.

"No mama," she wailed and I told her to put Grampa back on the phone. "No," she said, her voice stronger before she hung up the phone.

Normally I would have brooded, then found a way to return to her, but Daniel was so compelling, his eyes held such promise and mystery that I turned to him in a heartbeat and put her out of my mind.

"I don't know what you do to me, but do it again, please," I begged later, my voice a husky whisper.

We were up the rest of the night. The next morning we slept late. We ordered coffee and cinnamon rolls from room service and carried them in white paper bags over to Grant park. The walk was warm and sultry. Once there, we sprawled across the ground, our backs against the low wall of Buckingham fountain, luxuriating in the cool spray. Soon I was lost in the feeling of serenity, sipping coffee and watching the rainbows created by the spray of the fountain shimmering in the early morning sunlight. Daniel had stretched out beside me, munching a roll, keeping his hand on my knee. Suddenly, A little boy about six years old, with long black hair streaming out below his blue Chicago Cubs baseball cap bolted from his mother and raced to the fountain, climbing in just a few feet away from us.

"Look at me, mama!" he shouted stretching drenched arms toward her as she ran towards us, her platform shoes clunking across the cement.

Daniel stared at the boy, his hand tightening on my knee so hard it hurt and I heard him draw in his breath as if afraid.

“Get out of there this instant, you little brat,” his mother yelled leaning into the fountain to grab him, her short leather skirt hiking up her skinny legs.

“Don’t talk to him that way,” Daniel said in a harsh voice I hadn’t heard from him before.

She turned to him.

“Mind your own business,” she said back, just as fierce. Daniel stood up, his hands fists by his side.

“I said, don’t you talk to that boy like that, you’re lucky to have him; if he died you’d feel like an asshole for treating him like this.”

“You’re crazy, mister” the mother said to him, pulling her son out of the fountain by one slippery hand.

They left, with her pulling his arm as he dragged his feet, still facing backwards toward the fountain, a look of longing on his tear-streaked face.

Daniel slumped down next to me, covering his own face with his hands.

“What is it, Daniel?” I asked, worried about what I’d just seen.

“He looks just like David,” he said, his voice cracking as I watched tears streaming down his cheeks, spilling out between his fingers.

He cried for a while and all I could do was place my hands over his, catching his tears in my palm.

“Who’s David?” I finally asked.

“My son, He replied.

“Where is he now?” I asked, afraid to hear.

“Dead. He’s dead. He fucking died and now I’ll never see him again.”

“What happened, Daniel?” I asked, sensing that was also part of his pain.

“It was my fault, all my fault . . . if I wasn’t such a god-damn fool I’d have him with me today.”

“What happened, Daniel?” I repeated, stroking his forehead with my hand.

He reached up and grasped my hand away from his face, clinging tightly as he stared at me, his eyes still wet.

"I told him to go to his room and I'd be up soon and then he'd be really sorry he'd gone down to the creek by our house, early in the morning to swim by himself. I was so frightened by the specter of him drowning I lost my head and yelled at him, the first time ever. A few minutes later, after I'd cooled down, feeling like such a jerk for yelling at my boy, I ran upstairs to his room to apologize. I wanted to explain to him how afraid I was, imagining him dead, and that was why I lost my temper the way I did. When I walked into his room, he must've been expecting holy hell from me; after I yelled at him I'm sure I seemed like an unpredictable monster, capable of anything. He flung himself against his window, which ran from the floor to the ceiling, cowering close against it." Here Daniel took a deep breath and looked away for a few moments, clenching and unclenching his hands.

"The window was open and the screen popped out from the pressure he put on it, trying to keep away from me he fell three floors to the cement patio below, breaking his neck. . . he was dead by the time I raced downstairs."

"Oh god, Daniel, I'm so sorry," I began, but he held up his hand to shush me.

"Don't feel sorry for me—I'm the one who drove him to his death. Now you know what a jerk I really am."

"What about his mother?" I asked after a few minutes passed.

"She left. That same day. Said she couldn't stand to live with the man who'd murdered her son. I haven't seen or heard from her since."

I knew no words could bind the wound he'd shown, so I held his hand and gazed up at the clouds racing by overhead, desperately wishing there was something I could do or say to alleviate his pain.

"That's why you understand about Ava," I finally said, feeling the anxiety for her safety creeping inside me. I wanted

to call her, to make sure she was okay, but I knew Daniel needed me right then as a woman, not as someone else's mom.

"Let's walk back to our room," I insisted, By the time we got back to our room it was late morning. I pulled him towards the bed and he stood still, while I gently stripped his clothes from him, piece by piece. When he was naked I told him to lie down, and I stretched out next to him, naked myself, and began stroking him: his face, his hair, his hands. I traced my fingers up and down the length of his body like I did for Ava on those nights she couldn't fall asleep. Automatically I hummed lullabies to him, driven to provide comfort the only way I knew.

Eventually he fell into a deep sleep, snoring softly. I got up, pulled on my robe and then noticed the red light on the telephone signaling a new message had been left while we were out. I dialed the operator and heard Ava's voice on the recording: "Mama I need you, please come to me."

Panic suffused my body as I returned her call.

I whispered, afraid to waken Daniel.

"What's up, baby?" I asked.

"Why are you whispering?" she whispered back.

"I don't want to wake Daniel."

"Do you love him more than me?" she asked, her voice still small.

"Of course not," I replied, feeling mixed-up and guilty.

"Come home to me, then," she implored. I felt so miserable myself, staying away from her, now more than ever aware of the harm lurking behind seemingly innocent things.

Daniel turned and moaned, and I pulled the telephone cord tight as I reached across the bed to stroke him, to soothe him.

"I'll call you later, princess...go play with Grampa, he knows lots of stories and games."

Suddenly the image of the picture I'd taken of the two of them before I left drifted into my mind. I realized that Ava had replaced me as his favorite child, and as the youngest in a family of six, finally felt only happiness and relief.

I did my best to convince myself that my father had maintained the same ability to pay attention to Ava that he had shown me as a child. I pushed the frightened images out of my mind of her falling out of a tree and breaking her neck, or drowning in the bathtub if he was called away by the phone and began to repetitively chant, “she’ll be okay, she’ll be okay, she’s with dad, she’ll be okay,” like a mantra, whispering the soothing sounds to myself.

Still, my voice roused Daniel and he awoke, looking momentarily perplexed, before he reached his hand toward me.

“Come here, angel,” he said and I forgot Ava again, filled with desire for him.

Nine days and nights passed like that, and finally it was time to go home. I had never felt so ripped apart, so pulled by opposing forces as I did during those long days on the road; my desire to be with Daniel and my despair over leaving Ava held equal sway over me, making me feel vulnerable and crazy much of the time. I called Ava every day, and with each call, sensed her irrevocably slipping away from me.

Daniel and I drove down our road, and just before we turned into the driveway I was filled with such anticipation and dread, as well as sadness the trip was at its end, that the disorientation I’d felt the entire time overwhelmed me again.

“It’ll be okay,” Daniel said, flashing that knowing grin at me.

Ava ran out of the house and so far down the driveway that Daniel stopped the jeep just after he’d turned off the road.

I flung open my door and Ava leaped into my lap, her arms clinging tightly around my neck, just as she had when I left.

When I was finally able to say something, choking back the easy tears I cried upon seeing her, I said, “so who are you today, princess, Dorothy or Cinderella or somebody new?”

She pulled back and looked me solemnly.

“I’m Ava,” she whispered. “I’m your little girl.” I could tell my tough cookie had softened a bit, and I was filled with

wonder and a little dread; changes in my life have usually brought pain, not relief.

Daniel leaned over and opened the glove box. He took out a handful of small carved animals and smiled at Ava with such care and concern I knew I wanted to be with him for as long as I could.

"I made these for you when we were gone; there's enough animals joined together two by two to fill an ark and repopulate the world."

I turned to him.

"When did you do that?" I asked.

"When you were sleeping," he replied, and I knew my suspicion that he'd been up all night some mornings when I awoke had been true.

Ava stuffed the wooden animals into the various pockets of her striped overalls, then grabbed one of each of our hands and began tugging at us.

"Come inside," she demanded. Daniel looked at me, seeking agreement, and the feeling silently communicated between us made my knees so weak I almost fell out of the Jeep.

We walked in through the kitchen door and my dad turned from the hash browns he was frying on the stove and said, "Well, you're finally home."

By the look on his face I knew that things had smoothed out with Ava, but I was still surprised to hear her beg him to take her riding, once breakfast was done. As far as I knew, Ava was terrified of horses.

"She's turned into quite the equestrian," my father answered my questioning gaze, pride swelling in his voice.

"How'd you manage that?" I asked him, but Ava answered for both of them.

"Grampa held me on his lap on Trigger, and let me guide the reins. Trigger is so sweet, he ate all the carrots and sugar I gave him, right off my hand without biting me. So, yesterday I rode him all by myself clear around the corral. Grampa

said today he'd saddle up Rusty and we'd ride together for a picnic down to the Big Creek."

Still reeling from amazement—this was my daughter who faced new situations with trepidation and dread?—I automatically made a lunch for them and packed it into her canvas backpack.

"Don't forget apples and carrots for the horses," she reminded me, suddenly an expert.

Once they'd left and I'd poured second cups of coffee for Daniel and myself, I sat down across from him and asked him the question that had been on my mind for days.

"Will you stay here with Ava and me?" I asked.

Daniel paused long enough to let me know he wasn't going to give the answer I wanted to hear. I felt the sinking knowledge that my inherent ability to persuade another to do as I wished would not work this time.

"Well," he finally began, "I know I'm not ready yet to live with a little kid; I'm still too raw inside from David. It's only been a year," his voice trailed off filled with grief.

I looked out the window and saw Ava and my father ride by, with her so tall and proud in the saddle, and him shadowing her, watching every move.

"Everything's changing so fast," I murmured, trying to hold back my tears.

Daniel reached out and took my hands in one of his.

"I'll still come see you, and Ava too," he said.

"But when?" I pleaded, ashamed of my greed.

"As often as I can. When I'm home from the road, I'm just two hours away."

Doubt crept into my voice; no one had ever cared enough about me to endure a long drive just for my company.

"How can I believe that?" I said, feeling both angry and sad.

"You'll have to see it, I guess," he replied, squeezing my hand tighter.

"Let me show you again how much I care," he said, pulling me to my feet and towards my bedroom.

A couple of hours later as he dressed, I merely I pulled a silk kimono around myself, knowing I'd be back in bed as soon as he left.

I walked him out the door onto the porch, and leaned against the railing as he kissed me deep and long before he ambled towards his truck. I'd already grown to love that subtle swagger in his walk, the swagger that said he knew he was being watched. I couldn't step away from the railing to wave goodbye as he backed out of my driveway; I feared I was seeing him for the last time and needed the sturdy wood to hold me up.

"I'll be back tomorrow," he called out the window, but I was still standing there wondering if it was true long after he'd gone. The wind whipped up a dust devil that tore my kimono open, laying me bare. I tore the loosened belt out of the loops, wadded it into a ball and used it to scrub the tears from my cheeks before I turned and slowly walked back inside the house.

"I want to believe you, I really do," I whispered again and again to myself, as I lay spread eagle across my soft feather bed. We'd both suffered damage that would take time to repair. I didn't know what would happen next; for once, my intuitive ability to predict the outcome of any story, even my own, eluded me. I was filled so full of feelings that overwhelmed me that I wandered downstairs, poured a tumbler of Vodka and took it back up to my room, not caring as it sloshed onto the carpet when I climbed the stairs. After sitting up in bed and chugging it fast as I could, I dropped back onto my pillows, passing out from the combination of tears, anxiety and alcohol. The next few hours were filled with disjointed crazy dreams, of being with Daniel, his abandonment, his return, his abandonment again. I woke as dizzy and disoriented as when I fell asleep, momentarily confused by not knowing whose hot body was pressed up close to mine. Finally, the sensory input Ava's sweaty little body gave me, her hair smelling of Johnson and Johnson baby shampoo, caused me to take the first ragged

breath of contentment I'd felt for hours. I lay next to Ava cuddled up to her familiar warmth for a few minutes, while I tried to placate myself by thinking I could only wait and see what tomorrow would bring. I wanted to believe Daniel, tried to believe, but because of my lack of certainty I finally I scrunched out from under Ava's grasp, careful to keep her asleep. I zig-zagged back downstairs to refill my glass and carry the bottle back upstairs to keep under the bed, for later. Even then I didn't know how the alcohol was keeping me obscured from Ava, from myself.

Daniel was right; it took me a long time seeing him return again and again to finally believe him. Even more time after that relinquishing the numbing solitude of alcohol. The years have blurred in my mind until recently; now Ava is grown and lives with her own husband in Southern California.

This picture stands on my dressing table, the frame is inlaid silver. Every time I pick it up and gaze at my baby girl, I am reminded of the primal closeness she and I once shared. I look into those plaintive eyes, that pouty face, and revel for a moment in our early wanton love.