AMY HOLMAN

SAVING A SISTER

THE OARS WERE VERY HEAVY and the sisters split the task between them, sitting side by side, chanting Gwny's rhythm, "have some consommé, please have some consommé," and imagining they were slicing huge silver servers through their mother's gelatin soup. It was easy to trick her sister, and every several strokes, Gwny failed to dip her oar, so Fadilla inadvertently steered them towards the garden isle and the dogs.

Mrs. Perkinsoy, away in Montreal visiting her sons, had enormous, prize-winning rhododendron hedges you could walk inside. She and Gwny would take tea in these gigantic rooms at a café table covered with white linen, and hang small lanterns on bent branches. Gwny danced in the ripple of light and shade under the sea, marveling at the clarity of her voice, while Mrs. Perkinsoy gave her phrases from plays she herself had performed as a girl in her parent's traveling road show. And the dogs ran around and around, chasing each other outside the bushes with panting breaths and crying barks.

Gwny was ten, obstinate and secretive, and beginning to see herself in a surreal world where leaves were daggers, rabbits, or obliterating brush strokes on canvas. Shadow created leaves as often as leaves shadow, and equally they concealed her. If light could leave and add blue to green and place could change her voice from silent to heard, then nothing was dependable even if it was certain. Twice this summer, Gwny had lured her sister into trouble that distracted from her own bad behavior, yet was not surprised she could trick her again. Only

disappointed that their father had not caught on to Fadilla's eagerness to be at the center of conflict and followed her to the source. The light was fading on the river, dark shapes of islands changing, when she finally heard her sister's complaints.

HUNCHED AND STILL DRESSED in his damp tuxedo, Oberon worked his way through the huge, cathedral walls of waxy rhododendron leaves and pale gargoyle blooms, tripping on bent branches and barking one shin on an unexpected garden chair before tasting the dewy earth in pain. At home, Fadilla's hydrangea blue bed fit openly in the gabled west window of the room she shared with Gwny, and Oberon had already searched with the help of friends the open nooks of the house, boathouse and grounds. Gwny's bed lay under the sheltering eaves, drawn with two layers of drape-lace dancing ladies from Idaline's bridal chest and linen printed with blue violets. Unable yet to call in the constable, Oberon let his guests go and finally remembered Gladys Perkinsoy's fantastical island and friendship with his older child, and drove his boat across the river. Yes, Gladys would have sent word, but Oberon was on the scent of his girls, exhausted from scotch and no sleep, lured by a dreamlike clarity.

He found them when Fadilla's red plaid dress popped into view in a stream of dawn light. Gwny's dove gray wrapped in Idaline's lace shawl obscured her in the dappled light and shade. When Oberon's wife wore lace he wanted her more, seeing her nudity filtered as if through leaves, as if in a wild place. His daughter should not wear this lace in dress up, she could tear its fine weave, he thought as he knelt beside her. She was too young to be alluring, he thought behind the scrim of his consciousness.

Their bellies were moving, their lungs full of air, their hearts still beating. Fadilla's arms were flung to her sides fully trusting of the night, one hand just touching Gwny's, but her face was flushed and her hair damp at the brow. Oberon caught sight of darkness between the locks of her light brown hair even in this eerie green light, and fanned his fingers over the place. Yes, a bump, oh no, blood. With his heart split up and beating in both shoulders, he turned to Gwny whose head was turned down, chin touching the shoulder of the arm flung across her chest. Her dark hair fanned on the ground like it was blowing in the wind of her running feet. She was dry, but her feet were crusted with—

Her eyes opened and he caught his breath as if the opposite had occurred, as if her eyes had closed forever, and he reached to touch her face. She rolled out from under and stood up, breathless. Oberon followed her gaze to her sister and heard Gwny say, "she's not dead,

she's fever, but you're here, now." I've lost my mind, he thought, leaning over and lifting dear Fadilla—his Dilly girl—into his arms. He forgot himself as he stood straight, releasing the tension on a small tangle of branches, one of which drew a sharp line down the diagonal of his face. He caught his balance and turned in time to see Gwny escape through a hole. Kissing the one daughter he could, Oberon ducked and tiptoed out of the hedge in time to see Gwny reach the dock.

On the boat, he wrapped his unconscious daughter in his jacket and lay her on the seat at the stern, stood up, squinting in the bright morning light, and realized he had not yet spoken a word. Turning, he found himself unnerved by the wide, doll eyes of his other daughter, until he felt the sting of his facial wound. Wiping away a bit of blood, he saw Gwny's expression change, but still he did not speak. Part of him was still unsettled, the whole situation getting better and worse, simultaneously.

He'd begun to steer the boat away when he discerned a single, heavy splash above the churn of blades in the water, and turning, saw she was gone. Turning the boat while cutting the engine, he spotted Gwny's head bob and dove in. The nightmare had sunk its teeth in him. While Gwny was easy to grab, his swim was arduous with her dragging, and then, the boat had drifted. He had to feed her onto the boat and wait for her to sit before he hoisted himself into the craft. His clothes were a vessel of river. Both frightened and relieved that Dilly had not woken up, he wrapped Gwny in a blanket and his arms around her, but beneath the great weight of his drenched suit, his bones felt like cartilage.

THE DAY BEFORE WHEN THE LAST preparations for their summer evening party were underway, the girls were getting into trouble, so Idaline put them to service making bouquets. But, the party turned out to be just a larger source of mischief and when they soaped the banister, he blew. Gwny vanished, and he would have hit Dilly but for his sudden recall of a bored boyhood. So, he just kissed his successor on the head and sent a stern word for Gwny. The last time he saw them was when George Hummer showed Oberon his brand new Deusenberg, standing beside Dilly on the other side of the car while Gwny dared to stand next to Oberon. Whenever he slid his hand over the black and white saloon or wheel guard, Gwny did the same.

George was a cake-eater, a ruffler, a slightly suspicious business man rumored to have run liquor between the New York and Canadian islands a few years back, making a small fortune that garnered him this automobile and latest advertised luxuries for his distracted wife.

He liked to catch people off-guard with unsettling, off-color remarks, and Oberon didn't like him. But George supported the paper he worked for with his Discount Gasoline advertisements to subscribers, and he'd felt obliged to invite him to parties. George had made a remark about the girls, as if Oberon's accomplishments would vanish in the absence of sons, then went on to brag about his Henry going to study business in New York. Dilly ignored Gwny's vigorous signal to come over, and boasted to George, "I'm going to be like Lillian Boyer and walk on the wings of flying bi-planes." His eyes looked greased as he glanced back and forth from Oberon to Dilly, before saying, "Ooh, so delightful." Oberon recalled a heat in his throat, an urge to sock him, but Dilly was challenging him. "What do you say, Papa," so all he did was lean over the car cavity and say, "Oh, you think so?" When she smiled and nodded her head, he reached out and pointed his finger, playfully, "No, not ever." His now unconscious daughter had popped her tongue out, squealed and run with Gwny on her tail.

"Gwny, what happened to Fadilla," he spoke aloud, river slapping the teak hull.

"My fault—she's going to die."

"No, no, she's not. What happened?"

"So tired, the river, she was over with the oar and, but I got her, anyway," she gasped, and Oberon thought that explanation was all wet, not just them. Agitated, afraid for Fadilla, he knew he should go home. Why did they go in the boat, what had he seen on Gwny's feet?

"What about your feet? They're covered in blood and dirt."

She lifted her clean, river fresh feet and looked at him, frowning.

"Before, Gwny, when I found you. You smelled of blood," he said, listening to the words he was speaking as if he was not in control of them.

"I want to go home," she whined, holding herself in a hug.

"Okay, okay, Gwny, home," but he was feeling duped and pointed his finger at her as he rose. "I don't want you in that boat, again."

"Mama gave it to us," she said.

"You can't use it, Gwny, did you hear me?"

"It's ours."

"What?" He didn't like his anger now when everything was unruly. "Play with it on land, then, use your imagination!"

"I have to go back. She's my friend."

"Where is Mrs. Perkinsoy?"

"Montreal."

"Mon—then what are you doing on her island?"

"I'm welcome and she—"

"If she's there, Gwny, not if she's away. No wonder. Look, you're too young to go rowing this far, and I don't like that you did," he said, drawing large breaths to calm down.

"No, I'm not," she said.

"What? Didn't you just tell me that you got tired and Dilly fell in and hit her head—"

"I didn't get tired, she did."

He felt a chill, followed by tremendous fatigue. She didn't mean that the way it sounded, she was being fresh because of fear. He knew he should get them both home, it was just that now, despite her jump in the water—which he could barely put his heart to—Oberon was tempted to just start yelling to match the screaming inside his head. Don't you be rude to me, Gwny," he said, quietly, "We've been sick with worry. Your sister is knocked out, and you contradict me? I've gotten nowhere with you, I can't understand you. Is this code? What's going on?"

"I have to feed the dogs," she said, anxiously.

"What?"

"Bean, Betty, Stew and Lucy. She said so, every two days."

He stared for a moment, his hands on his hips, legs apart and scissored for balance. "Are you suggesting that Mrs. Perkinsoy put you in charge of four dogs while she was away? When does she come back—no, you

know, I don't care. You're a child, you're not responsible. I'm not letting you go back there."

"I have to, Papa, I owe them," she said, inscrutably, but he couldn't bother to decode this, and turned and pulled in the anchor. "Every two days or they'll starve," she said, and he walked past her to the wheel and restarted the motor. He felt undone, and drove fast across the water, standing at the helm. As their dock came into view, he cut the engine and steered it. Idaline was expectant on the dock, arms folded against internal uprising.

"Mama will let me go back, she will," Gwny said, and Oberon couldn't resist the temptation.

"What dogs, Gwny? I didn't see or hear any."

"Scottish deerhounds—Bean and Betty—and Bernese Mountain dogs—Stew and Lucy. They're huge," she said, eyes wide, almost mocking him.

"You're joking," he said. "Where were they?"

"In their gate."

"Listen you, I'm going to spank you for—"

"What are you saying," Idaline called out, beckoning Gwny with wide arms.

"Come my lovely." Gwny climbed onto the dock and glanced at Oberon with triumph. As he moved forward to give her a spank, Idaline shrieked at the sight of their youngest, and Oberon's hand instead went up to calm her.

"Just send for Dr. Willis," he said. "Go, go!" Idaline caught her breath and looked down at Gwny in her arms.

"*Ma cherie*, you are an adventurer, what worry you gave," he heard her say as he picked up Fadilla. Nauseated, he sat for a minute, then stood and balanced his stance with his daughter in his arms. He flashed to something back on the Perkinsoy island. A dog? What was it? Why was Gwny so contrary when she usually was elusive. Dilly was the one who chattered on about this and that, telling tales he had to decide were real or fake. That was their game, Dilly's and his. How would she tell this? But four dogs would smell him, and come running, or bark

and throw themselves against a fence. Why would Gwny make up a thing like that? Idaline came down the hill from their house in time to help him disembark. She took Dilly from his arms and glared at him. All definition eluded him, but not all sense, and he shivered.

Dr. Willis spoke to Oberon and Idaline in the library after examining the girls. He said Fadilla's head was concussed, and she resisted questions and shielded her face, but could speak clearly. He also said the abrasion on her head was not from a smooth, blunt object like an oar, but a sharp one like a rock, and maybe Gwny forgot to mention something. Idaline said she would take care of it and interrupted Willis when he started to say more, rose and showed him to the door. Oberon was banished from the upper floor, so he went out to the lawn and fell asleep in a chair, waking hours later, muscle sore and burnt. He cleaned up, carefully shaved his red, cut face, and then started a fight with his wife.

"Adventure, *ma cherie*? How can you be so cavalier, Idaline, we could be burying them tomorrow," he said.

"Hush, hush! She needs me to say it was terrible?"

"Yes!"

"I will not. She meant no harm."

"Could you show concern?"

"How dare you? At least I allow freedom—you make them afraid. You are afraid they'll grow up and leave you. Independence is natural, Oberon. Let them be children."

"That doesn't make any sense. What did you just say?"

"You teach them independence, little by little."

"Like giving them a rowboat?"

"Oh, I did not give her permission to take it out. Nor was I the one who invited the Hummers. You did!" She stood up and spoke with a proprietary tone, "I am sure I am the only one who knows what happened." He frowned, as she merged into French, with the same frustration he'd felt earlier when Gwny said she owed a strange pack of obsolete monster dogs. Idaline led him on a mysterious trail he was to blame for not following, or understanding, except a few phrases and

the flag of his daughter's name. He was so irritated and then his ears rung where she'd slapped him. His day never recovered, though he went into the library and sat at his desk, and sat at the supper table, trying to eat.

And here, with the children piled in their bed, asleep, he pondered the clues of the last day. Sequestered from his family and the truth, he'd failed his responsibility to protect them. Back in the boat there was a mood of shame more than concern for blame, and this hooked onto his wife's words now filtering down through his consciousness. She pushed him away in fear by speaking in a language he barely understood. Well, it didn't much matter, now, for he heard. She said the girls were ruined.

THE DEERHOUNDS HAD STOOD AT THE SMELL of sandalwood, the small thud series of wood against wood, water intervening. One hound looked back at the guard dogs reclining alert on the outside of the hedge that hid the children, and thought, stay, to which their eyes replied, always. And the deerhounds slunk across the lawn, heads low, lips rising in whispery snarls at the newcomer. Who is he, one asked, just as a base note of sweet alyssum arose through sweat. Theirs, the other said, and they divided, he stealing down to the dock through the dusky dawn, she shadowing the man as he climbed the hill to the huge hedges. Where's the meat, she thought, and one guard answered, home, and added, I'm hungry, but then they all remembered how their girl had started screaming, kicking, crying, "Stop, stop." Not that again, no, not that. Leave it, they all thought at once, as one.

Fadilla lay in the bed with her body as close to her sister's as possible, listening to the rhythm of her falling sleep, and watching again those black leaves, white leaves, gray, pink, red falling from the tree, gusting up and circling Gwny, sniffing and snuffling, howling, brown, black, and gray ones sticking to her legs as they landed, blotting her feet. Not so sensible, like Gwny painting a picture in her eyes.

Rounding the nightmare hour, right arm asleep under Gwny's sleep, left hand extended and cupping Dilly's head, Oberon was wide awake and rigid, the details sifted and harsh. He'd shed a few hot tears like he was a boy, stinging the gash on his face, and now he felt them dried in salt paths on his cheeks.

Filbert's motorboat was missing after the party, as was Hummer, and neither had returned. Gwny had blood on her feet but no cuts and Dilly had a gash, bump and fever, but no smell of river in her clothes.

One of his children had wanted to drown and one of his children shut them out, uttering sleep gibberish, "Dogs are falling on him." As a newspaper reporter, Oberon had come across stories too horrible to print and worse, discovered a propensity after delivering the story on his editor's limited terms, to remember the pared down version over the truth.

So he extricated himself from the bed, feeling the unnerving weight of his sleeping, useless right arm as he grabbed clothes with his left to dress in the hall. Downstairs, he took a lantern and shotgun from the hall closet and slipped out of the house and down to the skiff left by Hummer. He was untying the craft when he heard the drumbeat of feet on the dock. He lifted the lantern to Gwny's face.

"Without me the dogs won't let you," she said, hands in fists at her sides.

"Where's Mr. Hummer?"

"The dogs."

Oberon set the lantern down and sighed. He closed his eyes for a second, opened them. "I don't know what you mean, Gwny, but I have an awful idea why he was there. I don't know why you hit your sister with a rock, or why you both went to the island in the first place. But he must have hurt you. Tell me."

"I'm coming with you," she said, fluttering past him into the skiff, so light and delicate, he could feel Hummer's throat closing in his hands. He got in, not really sure why he was taking her along. Could there really be dogs? Dilly seemed to agree. The light of dawn was not so far off, and he started rowing. The morrow would be Sunday, quiet for the most part, except for the boats going to services at Silver Cove.

"Gwny, please, what do you mean when you say, 'the dogs' in answer to my question, 'where is Mr. Hummer?'"

"They ate him," she said.

For Gwny, darkness was like the ear of her blind grandfather; she could speak freely because she was invisible. Her mother made light irrelevant and speech unnecessary, earlier, as if already knowing its content. She hadn't needed specifics, and knew how soft and unspecific a washcloth was in the soothing, warm oat bath she drew for Gwny after the doctor left. Placing a soft cushion on her seat at supper was the nicest, and

Gwny almost cried to have anyone know anything without the need of words. This was their secret, secluded in the familiar. Telling the secret in the dark was like not being the one to tell it.

He stopped rowing once or twice after she said things, even though she didn't say some things because she was afraid. He rowed so fast from his arms so long that when he stopped they still moved far. Mr. Hummer was always showing up, hungry, in rooms she would leave, which she didn't say. He pushed her up against the tree, she said to Papa, she felt the bark bite her back, his body change from big square to moving parts. But she did not say that he made a noise, almost crying. She kept slipping away from him at parties, she got expert, imagining herself like Mata Hari, only better—never caught, never killed. When he pushed her against the tree—so heavy, rubbing—it was a relief for a second that she wasn't running, like for a second it had all gone away. But a second later it was worse, and she couldn't remember how she let him catch her, and felt sick for being relieved. This she did not say to Papa, either. "It's not your fault," he said, "Everything will be better." Since she had kind of lied to him by giving him only bits, she had the feeling he was kind of lying to her now about what lingers, what leaves.

DILLY WAS PAPA'S FAVORITE and Gwny had only thought he'd follow if she took her along. She just wanted to go someplace that man would not be, not thinking he'd come after them. She thought they'd just play inside the bushes, cause worry enough to break up the stupid party. Dilly said Papa was angry about the banister, the salt in the sugar, Gwny running off, and was going to tell her so himself at bedtime, but Gwny told her, "We'll paint it over. All he'll see is how we're safe, be so relieved." It's just that she got angry when Dilly said aloud before Mr. Hummer had even noticed, "That's the man with the new car," and ran to greet him. She wasn't thinking, exactly, just threw the rock when Dilly had his hand and was bringing him over. He was surprised, but she threw one at him, too. The dogs were shouting in their pen. But how did Papa know she threw the rock? Well, he was letting her go without punishment because he was relieved, and she'd make sure he'd let her go, again, by not admitting it, and by saying different things he didn't understand. She could trick her Papa, too, she was proud to think.

He rowed over to the shore instead of the dock, and Gwny saw them waiting, as if her scent had wafted over the river. "There," she said, and pointed, when her father had locked the oars and was moving to rise and step out into the shallow water. He turned and stumbled, cursing at the row of faces, and turning back to look at Gwny. The light was not day, but they could see each other in the charcoal gray air. On

the sand, the dogs circled and sneezed, and Gwny dove into the Bernese multicolored fluff and wet noses, while the hounds made little excited, protective whimpers. She wished they could accompany her for life.

"Stay here," Papa said, sharply, and they let him pass, but one. Bean danced ahead, pausing every yard or so, then running forward.

"How come he's with you," Gwny called out, jealous.

"You stay there," Papa said.

Betty howled at the loss of her mate, who barked. She turned and licked Gwny nestled in between the others. Gwny fell asleep and woke to bright sunlight and Stew jabbing her with his elbows as he rose, swift and heavy. Papa was coming back to the boat, Bean prancing at his side.

"Say goodbye to the dogs," Papa said.

"Was he dead?"

"No," he snapped his fingers and walked over to the dock. His shirt was unbuttoned and he started to close it. She looked around.

"Where's the other boat?"

"Let's go, come on, hurry up."

"But where is he?"

"I'm serious, Gwny."

But she didn't want to be rushed, and turned to smile at the smiling faces, long pink tongues. The hounds were eye-level, old-faced and messy, and they must have gone swimming since their paws and muzzles were no longer bloody. She looked back and forth from Papa on the dock to the dogs on the beach. They had leapt over their fence to save her, and she felt like a scented beast among them, like she needed their camouflage for her distinct and wild thoughts. Nobody knew what it was like to be saved like that, and she belonged to them now. He'd stopped her from swimming back the day before, but he wouldn't stop her now.

"I'm going to stay here, I think. I know where Mrs. Perkinsoy keeps her biscuits and oranges."

He came over slowly, with a body different than usual, hunched sideways, and he was looking at her like he wasn't sure he recognized her. Why didn't he just go home and take a nap, come back for her tomorrow? Just as he came up close she saw his anger, but she was sleepy and slow. The dogs barked and jumped on him when he grabbed her and held her aloft, but stopped when he shouted, "Down," and fell back, uncertain. As he lowered her and her feet touched the dock, Papa leaned forward and she was pressed against his legs. Her heart caught in her throat, because she was trapped, but he spanked her twice, and let her go. She cried, and he lifted her into the boat. The dogs whimpered and growled but did not come forward.

Papa didn't let her get away. All summer she'd fooled him. She was mad at herself for losing, and kicked him with her foot as he rowed out of the shallow water. It was hard to get comfortable, but he didn't react to her kicking, squirming, or crying, and soon she stopped, and watched the rhythm of his arms, and his steady aqua gaze. Maybe it was okay to be caught by someone safe. All she ever did was roam around on adventures to tell her mother, and escape Mr. Hummer at parties. Papa's arms were strong in and out of his sleeves and there was dirt on the front of his shirt.

"Where is he," she whined.

"I buried him."

"Alive?"

"No," he said, with a soft, sharp tone suggesting a whole explanation just out of reach. Still curious about the gap between burying him but not alive, when before he'd said that Mr. Hummer was not dead, Gwny watched Papa turn to see where he was rowing, then, stretch to look beyond her. For a split-second, he glanced at her, darkly, but not with a scary or mean look, more like a barrier to the scary places she'd be forbidden.

"Oh," she said, standing up. He paused, suspiciously, but she turned and sat in his lap, feeling now much safer, occulted in the boat. Sliding swiftly backwards, she liked floating away from the earth and her own control. She placed her hands on her father's bare forearms as he dipped the oars, continuing on across the green morning river, giving her the authority of his moving muscles and his view of the disappearing island.

THE RAIN DOTTED THE SASH and its aroma permeated the room, awakening Idaline to the woolly rug. She slipped from the covers and into her dressing gown as she went over to shut the window. Out on the lawn in the rain, Oberon sat with his back to her in one Adirondack chair, without trench coat or hat, and she turned swiftly around. Only Fadilla lay in bed, asleep, so she turned back to the lawn, where her husband seemed to be fidgeting with his lip the way he did when he thought through an angle to a story, staring out at the river. It was a driving rain and his skin was pink beneath the scrim of his shirt, his arm angled on the broad arm of the chair.

She swept over to the bed and put her face up close to her daughter's to feel her cool nose breath on her own face, a rare act of intimacy. A sudden heart wave broke, as she feared her daughter was not long for this world, and she drew back, as if Fadilla was already dead. Her breath was caught like a shirtsleeve on a nail, shredding slightly, but then she unhooked it, and calmed down. *I am not my mother*, she repeated, first under her breath, then over, until it crested a whisper into voice. Her brother's drowning five years following their father's in storms at sea was like a curse, her mother believed. Death is in this house, she'd say every stormy night, kissing our brows as we sleep. When Idaline could no longer get through to her mother, she'd thrown a tantrum—at seventeen. Horrified, she boarded a boat and let the terrible waves of two seas separate them. River like blood, daughter like mother. Always she knew the river she lived on could carry her back to the sea.

She walked back to the window, mesmerized by her husband's obliviousness to the weather's cost, sitting like a carving in the rain. There was something compelling, hidden and murky there on the lawn with him, and she felt itchy inside, and wet. She remembered the night she hid in the hollowed out, dying sycamore, barely clothed, to await him. He had said she startled him, so fully a part of the tree, its leaves, her tatted clothing, bare arms and branches. Like she was interred in it, glowing white skin, fragile eyes. He couldn't have sex with her there, and his fear frightened her, and then, because she was embarrassed, she had laughed and he was ashamed. They couldn't do anything, which made him angry and she embraced him, and they did it, angry, ashamed, purposeful, did it to be sure they were safe and not safe, the smell of the softly rotting wood, beginnings of rain swelling in the air without falling, her teeth biting his ear, stumbling and biting hard in falling to the ground, no one around, blood streaming down his jaw, her skin burning from a tenderly harsh slap. Playing house with everyone in it—father, mother, brother, sister, her body on fire, her body a flood. Now, why did she think of that?

Gwny! Where was she at this hour? She looked at the clock on the dresser, surprised to find it was past nine, much later than she'd slept in years. But then all the other details of the last night and day came rolling in and she ran down the stairs. Her breath outside her lungs, she heard a voice behind her and turned towards the kitchen. Gwny was in her nightgown and blue cardigan sweater Idaline knitted last winter. The kitchen light was on.

"Mama, I can make you toast and tea," she said.

"Oh," she caught her breath back inside her. "Yes, yes, but tell me, is there a good explanation for your father being out there without cover? How long have you been awake?"

"Before light. Come in the kitchen. Papa said leave him alone," Gwny beckoned with her hand, which seemed attached to a leash that drew Idaline from the foyer and into the kitchen.

"I'll boil you an egg," Idaline said, opening the icebox.

"Maybe Dilly wants tea with sugar?"

"Yes, love, later. Don't call her that, I don't like it, it is common. You can take a tray to her later, but how are you," she asked, holding out the hand that held the egg, wanting to drop it and touch her daughter's face, her child a man thought could do for a woman.

"Just berries, Mama, as Dilly would say. Dilly, Dilly, Dilly."

That can't be, Idaline thought, and she noticed tranquility wrinkled with a bit of mischief in Gwny's face, a familiar expression. Her instinct told her the girl was planning something, had done something, was maybe going to speak a lie. And the repetition of the nickname just after Idaline spoke unsettled her in the face of what already happened. How must she behave? What had changed? She was tired, frightened, felt herself unwinding. She uttered a phrase in French, more to herself than aloud, but Gwny heard it.

"Better to live than merely exist," she translated. "What's the difference?"

Idaline set the eggs down, weary and angry. This was punishment for giving her daughters freedom. Did George think himself a deer with an itch, rubbing against a tree? How would this feel in a girl so young? I, too, would spit in the face of my mother, she thought, bile rising in

her throat. Dr. Willis told her of bruises and abrasions, but no penetration, as if this appeased her. He suspected penetration, looked for penetration, as if such things could happen so easily. The world was boundless outside her door.

"Berries, Mama," Gwny repeated. "It means wonderful. Dilly knows all the words in English for wonderful. She doesn't like French, but makes her own language."

"Indeed, but I do not like that name."

"Papa calls her that," Gwny says.

"I know, but I am speaking to you," she said, facing Gwny, who saw that she was serious, and stepped backwards. Idaline did not like to be taunted.

"Why are you walking away, child?"

"I'm not, Mama."

"I should hope you stay put when your mother scolds you," Idaline frowned. A rock hit her sweetie's head, throwing brain against bone, so to think of anything in Fadilla's world as wonderful was mockery. That nonsense she spoke, "Old man is raining, the dogs are snoring," when Idaline bathed her the night before must have been a dream, or was that something to do with George Hummer? This kept flashing in her mind as she looked at Gwny hanging her head in apology.

"You mustn't push, Gwny. I am so very sorry I was not there, but you mustn't take advantage," she paused, looking at her, then noticed something. "Where are your slippers? How many times must I tell you to put slippers on your feet? Tell me?" Nothing but disorder, everything a mess. She felt unsteady. Gwny shrugged her shoulders.

"Nearly every day," Idaline's voice cracked. She kicked off one of hers, leaned down and picked it up. Gwny's eyes widened. "Look at me, Mademoiselle Gwny," Idaline instructed and those turquoise eyes lifted. "What do you see?"

"Your slipper in your hand, Mama."

"Indeed, why do you suppose I am holding it?"

Gwny shrugged and Idaline glared. "Papa hit me, already," Gwny said, pouting.

"Is that so, this morning?" Gwny nodded and Idaline dropped her hand to her side. "And yet, you tease your mother?"

"No," Gwny said.

"I heard you—"

"You made a mistake," Gwny said.

"I did? You teased me," she said. "You wish you hadn't but you did. 'Dilly, Dilly, Dilly,' you said, did you not?" Gwny nodded. "You said 'Papa calls her that' did you not? What else? Are you teasing me now, or suddenly ashamed?"

"No, I mean, yes."

"I am thinking perhaps your Papa was not firm enough," she said, stepping forward. Gwny put her hands behind her, but Idaline pulled one arm away and slapped the soft sole of her worn leather slipper once, firmly, remembering suddenly how it felt years before through dozens of them, gripping the footboard and whimpering.

"Ow," Gwny twisted, but Idaline held her shoulders and edged her towards the door.

"Upstairs, Mademoiselle. Put your slippers on and come down for breakfast. I have had enough of your insolence, disorder, your sly behavior," she said, ashamed from afar and unable to stop her harsh words. But when Gwny did not budge, she leaned down, and forced her around to face her. "Look at me," she said, and Gwny's eyes lifted. "So, your pride is hurt. Why not listen to me? Shall I follow you upstairs?"

"No, no, I'll go," Gwny's voice changed.

They stared at each other and Idaline was fraught with unease—why couldn't she control this child with words? I want a good child who might misbehave, she thought, not a molested child gone stubborn.

"I'll kill for you, Gwny, but I cannot have this arrogance! Go, and do not bother your sister."

Gwny darted up the stairs and Idaline felt better, stooping to put her slipper back on her foot. She had never before used an object on either of her children, but she put it out of her head. Restoring order in her home, she slipped into routine, placed a flame under a pot of water, cut bread, opened cupboards and closed them, cut some oranges, then placed the soft-boiled eggs in cups, tapped each one, broke off the caps. As she turned, she saw she was facing the front door. Perhaps I should take him his trench, she thought, rushing to the closet and lifting the garment off its hanger. Her blood ran cold at the missing shotgun and her hand was on the front doorknob when she heard Gwny on the stairs.

"Wait," she said, and Idaline turned to see she was not wearing her slippers on her feet, but on her hands like mittens.

"Last night we went back and I thought the dogs would stop him, but maybe since I was there. He buried him and he was dead when he did it and I slept on the sand. It's like we're bigger than everything and this is a dollhouse and he's the rain. I like my bare feet. I don't know what's going to happen, do you?" Gwny gracefully stepped down the last part of the staircase in such away as to exhibit her feet, until she was standing on the floor near her mother.

Idaline was speechless, feeling her own mouth tear open as she listened to this ramble. Her arms were full of trench coat and she was horrified at such outcome. She walked over and sat in a chair, as if to catch her breath. From the side of her face, she saw her child looking smart, smug. This is what she learned when I wasn't looking, she thought. Gwny walked over and flaunted her misbehavior. "I checked on my sister, she's awake." Idaline turned to face her and smiled, slightly, at the girl whose hair and eyes were like her father's even as her disposition was like her own. I am hiding inside you, she thought, and I have been so foolish, so irresponsible, so blind. She pulled her in as if to embrace her, for it was imperative Gwny not slip away, and it was herself she spanked, her own hand that flashed pink behind her on her daughter's flesh, and that she slapped away.

Outside, the water was warm and the air cool, like swimming, like she was a part of the rain, just as Gwny said. Oh, the anger of the night previous, how much she wanted to hate him for not finding the girls in time, to seclude herself from him with only enough sensible language to make him writhe. She'd put up walls but now she ran through muddy grass to face him. Gwny was conceived the night she lured him in a dead tree, so her mother was right. She could feel the kisses of rain on her brow. Oberon looked up at her and she threw the trench on him

like a blanket, climbed on the chair and curled her body over him, holding his neck and hiding him. She let the scream out of her head and it was fierce, aching, flooded with tears. His arms did not embrace her, but fell across her back like the insubstantial weight of lace.

IT WAS MERCY, NOT REVENGE. He was a coward, not a hero. When he came upon the mess, he was hoping for death, but got nothing like it. There was nobody, just wreckage of bloody clothes, shreds of it. So he walked toward the house, halting at a swinging gate. Calling out, he heard a rustle, and the deerhound edged over to him, and he shouted. Bean sat. Oberon slipped into the dog pen, holding the gate shut, at first, then lifting the lantern. He saw the wreckage of Hummer, not unlike the mess of clothes, crumpled against the stone wall of Gladys Perkinsoy's stone house, and naked but for garters and socks, dried and new blood. He let go the gate, set down the lantern, and knelt in supplication before the massive pool of blood at the man's groin. He'd been so enraged and was now taken aback. Then, the soft whinny emerged.

"Couldn't get it up," George wheezed, "for one so darling." That a voice could emanate from this pulp and greasy eyes was astonishing, and the words so outrageous, Oberon was both stultified and emasculated by them. He stared for several minutes before the whinny came again. "Come on, put out the light."

It was this pity he took on him, shoving a rag down his throat so he choked and suffocated. Overcome by the sight, he'd think later, by the admission between men, by the instruction given him. He smothered his paper's biggest advertiser, his daughter's molester, his party guest. He stripped off his own shirt and trousers, lifted the body and left the pen, carrying it down to the river. He stole into Gladys's boathouse and took out a can of gasoline and another rag and doused them, put back the can and ran an arc along the isle edge to the skiff they came in—Hummer's skiff. The dogs woke up, but Gwny did not, and they watched him shove off and row away. Back on the other side, he saw Bean feasting, but the dog backed off when Oberon approached. He lifted George and put him in the skiff, piled twigs on top, threw in the rag, took the lantern and rowed out to the spot where he could not see the hound dog. It was not yet dawn. He cracked the glass of the lantern and tossed it in with the twigs and the fumed rag, and dove into the river, swimming its green nightmare to shore. He watched the flames shoot up in the charcoal sky, and Bean waded in, licked his hand, smearing it with blood. They stood in the shallows, the boat broke apart and sank. He washed his hands and walked back and dressed and buried the clothes under the rhododendron, smacked his head on the

flat of a square lantern hanging inside the hedge. "What the hell?" He went back as light was joining them and inspected the pen, slapping the wall. Bean's graceful nose elongated to the spot, sniffing, and his tongue shot out, licking the smudge several times. It was then that Oberon laughed with an excess of energy, and looked at the dog who was as high as his waistline, almost as high as his children, and almost felt love for his accomplice. He'd be questioned, he'd lie. Idaline would lie. The paper would print a tribute to Hummer, he'd have to write it. It was over, it was never going to be over, yet it was over.

Oberon let Idaline run out of tears and howls. He hadn't really felt her, he was so numb, so glazed with disgust. He was a coward because he put that pervert out of his misery, seeing in George's nakedness and fatal wounds the ultimate vulnerability of his circumstance. There had been no alternative but to help him and thus no relish in killing him. It was mercy. But now, he wished he'd tortured him, baited him to all four dogs, made him suffer. Oberon had wanted to revise the whole story of the last few days, of which he'd lost control. And what had Gwny done to deserve his anger? She'd suffered enough. But after carting a corpse and setting it on fire, burying the evidence of the gruesome scene involving his children, Gwny's decision to stay on the island that had trapped her with the mauling monster dogs was like her telling him he couldn't be responsible for his family, that she was no longer his because he had not saved her. What had happened to his family? He should not have laid a hand on her and he shut his eyes against the scene, cringing at how much better he felt for slapping her. He now felt a hundredfold worse.

In the boat, as he dug into the water, the dogs collected on the edge of the dock. He should have put them back in their pen, he'd have to go back, he realized, rowing away, while Gwny beat up on him and cried. What if they dug up the clothes, dragged them onto the lawn? He should have burned them, and damn it, he forgot about Filbert's motorboat. That must be there somewhere. Then, Gwny settled in his lap and placed her starfish hands on his, and she seemed okay, then, in his imagined world of recovery that kept growing over the truth like algae.

What a girl will do to save her sister. He didn't like Gwny knocking Dilly out, but Dr. Willis was confident the injury was minor. Fadilla would soon be fine, God bless her. She was always the easy one. She would never know what happened and soon be telling stories about squirrels and dancing in the sky. It could have been so much worse, and he would have to make sure Gwny knew he was not angry with her for injuring Dilly, and he loved her courage. He should go tell her now, but he couldn't move.

Idaline had cried herself to a slim sleep and now, lifted her head, blinked her eyes. Oberon tilted in and kissed her, gently, succulently. It had stopped raining and his clothes were growing away from drenched to damp. She sat up, climbed off him, and sat in the chair next to his. "What exactly did you do?"

"Put him in his old skiff with some gasoline, set it on fire, sunk it."

"*Mon dieu*," she said. "Gwny says you buried him."

"Well, what would you say?"

"Any trace?"

"On the island? I buried his bloody clothes," he halted at her expression. "He was attacked by a pack of dogs, Idaline. He was near death."

"*Mon Dieu, mon Fadilla*."

"No, Gwny, not Dilly. There's more than a trace on Gwny, and before he died, that pervert told me how he couldn't get it up—"

"Stop," she shouted, waving her hands.

"There's more than a trace on us," he said.

"I'm so sorry I shut you out—"

"Don't be. You should mean whatever you said because I didn't do anything to prevent it and I didn't do anything to stop it. I took mercy on him, Idaline, that's all. It was mercy."

They were quiet for several minutes and he didn't care what she had said to him, he just wanted someone to know what he was and then, forgive him. His hopes were low, since he couldn't forgive himself.

"How," she asked with a firm voice, and he passed his hand over his nose in a gesture of suffocation.

"He wasn't dead, I just did him a favor."

"What was your choice? It was not in killing him you would be redeemed, Oberon. I have broken myself open on you, certain of your distaste, or worse, indifference. Will I lose you to the law, or worse? When we have raised them to women, whole and holy, then we will be

redeemed. We must never tell Fadilla, we cannot fail. Oh, my old ghosts."

"Don't get started, Idaline—"

"I am to blame, I should never have given them a boat—"

"Stop, because we have to be straight on what happened—for Gwny, the constable, Yolanda Hummer."

"Forget about Yolanda," she snapped.

"I couldn't even enjoy killing him and I hated him. He took power over me."

"Oberon, that beast is dead and his diseased desires are dead. How could you feel joy in killing? You would be a monster."

Oberon was redressed by her scolding but could not allow himself to believe her. Never was there a moment in all of this where he'd felt he had a choice in handling the situation. He was only now in charge of agreeing with her, and though she was persuasive, emboldening him with her hands, he could not do it.

THE ROCK MADE A SOUND like pounding piano keys with the bass pedal depressed, or like she was the instrument remembering it. It was like being downstairs when something heavy fell upstairs—a vibrant interruption. A patch of skin revealed itself raw and aflame, juiced with a trickle of blood, her thoughts filled with ache. She sunk her head in a dive, closing her eyes to watch the pain disappear, needing the soft ground leaves to cushion her, needing Mama to come now and find her.

The scent of damp soil, wet summer leaves torn from bushes, her burning, shifting head made Fadilla vomit, quietly, like a quick, liquid cough. No fair warning, no relief after. She tumbled and whimpered and in her own cry apart from her thoughts, heard Gwny cry and a dog pant. Opening her eyes, she saw that man's back and Gwny's red face, closed eyes, and arms thrown like running downhill. The man with the car was dog panting, trapping Gwny, and she kept crying. Fadilla wanted him to stop, and dizzily, she rose. She heard a grumbling, snarling and saw the dogs flinging themselves against their pen. Part buoyant, part sinking, as if her body was underwater and her head above, she moved past the figures to the fence and unlatched the gate. Trampled by locomotive, long gray engine, patchy caboose, she fell—

only she was Lillian Boyer falling from the wing of a biplane and turning into a bird. Smelling grass, she rolled over and saw strange, scruffy old bearded men pulling off planks from a window. A soft bear face hovered, white, black, brown, and licked her cheek. She grabbed the leg, sat up, stood up and rode the broad back. The dog walked slowly, and she slipped off, got back on, and slipped off again. She crawled behind the tree her sister sat against, peered around it. Gwny was watching the man shielding his face and screaming, spilled flowers he was, and leaves. There, Fadilla thought, go away.

She fell asleep in the gray, failing light, her head feathered by the leaves of pachysandra, and then smelled Papa's shoulder, damp and spicy. She was high upon it, her feet hung like cowbells and the sky was still light gray. Hours had pooled and dried in the sky like blood on her head. She remembered, and thought she must tell him, tell him.

Over Papa's shoulder, she saw an elephant get up, walk in a circle and lie down. Mr. Hummer's ghost, she thought, telling her he'd never forget. He'd walk a circle around her so she'd never forget. But what if she told Papa she killed Mr. Hummer? Would he believe her? Would he still love her?

Her arms felt like heavy wings covered in soft gray feathers. She opened her eyes and saw Gwny with pink bear paws, watching her.

"Mama hit me with a slipper, Dilly. I thought it hurt but it didn't really. Is that a rhyme?" She smiled and Fadilla blinked.

"The man with the car is dead," she said.

"Sshhh! Don't let Papa hear you," Gwny said.

"But I—"

"That's a secret. We can never say that," Gwny clapped her bear paw over Fadilla's mouth and she fell back in the pillows, lips numb. She closed her eyes. How could she not speak when that's how she traveled? She would have to tell Papa, very quietly, wouldn't she? Just to know. But now she wasn't sure she'd be telling the truth. She could hear her sister bragging, and a soft clapping like slippers on the kitchen floor. She could feel herself falling off a wing, wingless, human.

"Don't be afraid, silly," Gwny said. "Nothing happened."