Marga Levy and her daughter, Nancy, lived on a broad Upper East Side avenue, in a building faced with pink mottled granite, behind a pair of swinging doors off the lobby, under a steep staircase. Small apartments had been hollowed out a hundred years before, for the butlers and governesses of the families occupying the upper stories. Marga and Nancy inhabited a few rooms with high ceilings and thick white walls so often spackled and patched, swollen and sunken, that they seemed to have been formed by a geological event rather than the Brotherhood of Operative Plasterers and Cement Masons. The windows faced the airshaft, and by the time sunlight sank to its bottom, it was blue and weak. Almost nothing could be heard of the city.

“Nancy darling, your egg is ready.”

Marga set two plates on a tiny café table in the corner of the kitchen, two slices of dry toast with a single poached egg quivering on each. Nancy came to the table in the blue dress her mother had laid out for her. She was short, round and soft, with dark eyes and long brown hair that her mother was perpetually pulling off her face. At twelve she still looked like a child, but the flesh on her body gave her the curves of an older girl.

“Navy is a good color for you,” Marga said. “Neutrals hide flaws. Come eat your breakfast and I’ll brush your hair.”

Marga was a trim brunette from an Eastern European province of forests and foothills that on any day could be Czechoslovakia or Romania, depending on who held the border. Her once-heavy accent she subdued to a feline vibration that rose to a thrilling trill only when she was excited or called her daughter “darling.” She had been named Malka, but there was no one left alive to remember that.

Nancy ate breakfast while Marga plaited and pinned up her daughter’s hair. Marga’s brush strokes were not gentle and sometimes Nancy’s head jerked back from their force. If Nancy complained or pulled away in a spasm of mutiny, Marga tapped her on the shoulder with the back of the brush.

“Don’t struggle.” The roll of her R was a growl.

After breakfast Marga swaddled Nancy in a wool coat and scarf, set a blue velvet tam on her head, then walked her as far as the 77th Street subway station.

“Piano lessons today,” she called. “Csokolom draga, I kiss you, my darling.”

Like her parents before her, Marga desired a cultured household and took Nancy to the museum, encouraged her to read Zola and Stendhal, and arranged for piano lessons. In case Franz Josef returned from the dead and stopped by their apartment, Nancy would be able to play a little Chopin for him, perhaps after dinner. On Wednesdays, Marga left Saks early to accompany Nancy to her piano teacher’s apartment on West 86th Street. Marga in a camel’s hair coat, 35 percent discount for employees, stood over her daughter all the way from east to west on the crosstown bus, gripping the overhead strap. Nancy sheltered under her mother’s body, her hands moving over the cover of the music book in her lap as if she were already at the keyboard.

The piano teacher, Mrs. Sheminsky, lived in a building that looked like the Colosseum. In 1924, she had drunk prohibition gin and fallen in love with a mad Hungarian violinist who left her bleeding in an illegal abortionist’s operating room just off the Bowery. Now, 40 years later, she sat comfortably widowed, enfolded in her flesh, a frilly jabot at her neck, her fingertips dusted with powdered sugar from the shortcake Marga brought her. She tapped a red pencil absentmindedly against the shawl-covered Steinway grand in her living room.

“Maybe you should buy her a little girdle,” Mrs. Sheminsky said to Marga. “She’s getting fatter.”

“Girls today won’t wear girdles.”

“Well, she’ll need something soon. I was ten when my mother put me in my first corset.”

“When can she play the Liebestraum?” Marga asked.

“Oh Mrs. Levy,” Mrs. Sheminsky laughed, “her hands are much too small for that. It will be years. Do you know what Liebestraum means, Nancy?”

Nancy did not answer. She was infuriated by the conversation carried on over her head. She pretended to concentrate on the vicious hash she was making of the repetitious patterns of notes in her exercise book, meant to strengthen and stretch her fingers. They bored Nancy as much as the calisthenics they did at school. When Marga wasn’t at home, Nancy put aside her scales and exercises and played the Moonlight Sonata. She wanted now to bang out the sonorous gong of the melody and drown out Marga and Mrs. Sheminsky.

“Liebestraum, Nancy,” Mrs. Sheminsky repeated.

“It’s the dream of love.” The sleepy voice of Mrs. Sheminsky’s bachelor son, Arthur, came from the doorway, unshaven and still in his bathrobe. He was a trumpet player, an alternate for the Philharmonic. Out of his mother’s sight he called himself Arturotito and played bongos in a mambo band. He had recently become a heroin addict, though neither he nor his mother knew it yet.

“Cup of coffee?” Arthur asked. He always invited Marga out on dates. She never accepted, but was careful to maintain a low level of flirtatious tension between them. His infatuation was useful when she didn’t have the money for Nancy’s piano lessons.

“Oh, that would be nice, but I have an errand on Broadway.”

Marga walked around the corner to Amsterdam Avenue and into Barney Greengrass’s The Sturgeon King. She met Nancy’s father, Sy, there every Wednesday. He was sitting at a table in the back. A paper napkin hung from his shirt collar, pocked with the tomato seeds that squirted out of his whitefish salad sandwich. He held another napkin to wipe his mouth between bites. He nodded an acknowledgement to Marga and pointed to his cheek, swollen with a wad of chewed fish and bagel. It took repeated gulps to clear his mouth, Sy stretching his neck forward like a snake swallowing something larger than its head.

“What do you want,” he said finally.

“You’re a pig.”

“What do you want?”

“Money,” Marga said.

“I don’t have any,” he said and brought the sandwich to his mouth again. Marga slammed her hand on the Formica table, and Sy’s thick china plate lifted and spun like a quarter. He dropped his bagel.

“What are you, crazy?”

Sy had been a disappointment to Marga. She maintained a stable of slurs and accusations to be loosed whenever he came around, either in person or conversation. He was a bad provider, a gambler, a bum, a skirt-chaser, a bastard, a plague. When they’d met, she’d been fiercely attracted to his good looks. Like Tony Curtis, she’d thought, Americanized movie star Jew boy, manly and dreamy.

She kept to herself the events of the night she left him. He had slapped her face, not hard, but behind it she felt the force of every black-booted, unavenged injury. She stabbed him with a paring knife. When she departed, dragging a groggy, six-year-old Nancy and their largest suitcase, Sy was sitting at the kitchen table with a bloody dishcloth pressed to his wounded shoulder, still looking surprised.

“That’s right, I’m crazy.” Marga’s voice rose. “I need to pay your daughter’s piano teacher.”

“Ask my father,” Sy said.

“You ask your father,” Marga spat back. They stared at each other. Sy looked away first, rubbing his mouth with his napkin.

“I’ll have the money by the end of the week.”

“And now?”

“Tell her you’ll pay next week.”

“Like you, pay next week like you.”

After she’d stabbed Sy, Marga had taken Nancy to a friend’s apartment, where they slept on the living room couch until Marga found the apartment on Second Avenue and a job at Saks Fifth Avenue.

“I’m everything to you now, mother and father,” Marga had told Nancy, as if Sy were dead. The mission was noble but impossible, as if a crust of bread had determined to become soup, entrée, and sweet, an entire feast.

   
When Marga returned, Mrs. Sheminsky was placing a blue star just to the right of the words “Für Elise” in Nancy’s book.

“You’ll get a gold star next time, when you’ve practiced harder.”

She gave Nancy a powdery cookie to eat while she wrote out the lesson plan for the next week.

Nancy twisted around on the piano bench and saw her mother and Arthur in the hallway, Marga whispering in his ear, he touching her hair, she giving a ticklish shimmy and pushing him away. When Arthur saw Nancy watching, he winked at her.

Marga sent Nancy to wait in the hallway off the living room so she could talk to Mrs. Sheminsky. Nancy heard the piano plunge into a gay waltz, the piano teacher pumping the sustain pedal vigorously.

“Tell her to practice,” she chanted in three-quarter time, “or she won’t get better, not one iota.”

Nancy leaned against the wall. The door to the bathroom opened and Arthur came out, colliding with her. For a moment, her nose touched the furred chest inside his open shirt and she closed her eyes and inhaled the smell of his skin, sour and smoky under a gloss of aftershave. Nancy felt suddenly breathless, as if she’d run a city block. She teetered a little and Arthur, hands on her shoulders, straightened her up and moved her back against the wall.

“See you later, kitten.” He winked at her again. She stared after him, at his black hair lapping his shirt collar.

“Ma,” Arthur called as he walked into the living room where his mother sat at the piano. The music suddenly stopped. Nancy peered around the corner. Arthur was standing between Marga and his mother.

“C’mon, Ma. Give her a break. She’s having a hard time.”

Mrs. Sheminsky sighed.

“Don’t worry about it.” Arthur waved Marga toward the door.

   
They went to the Empire Diner for dinner.

“I want a cheeseburger and French fries and a Coke, please,” Nancy said to the waitress.

“No, she’ll have the diet plate,” Marga interrupted. “We’ll both have that. And hot tea with lemon.”

“Mommy,” Nancy protested. Marga frowned at her. The waitress returned with plates of iceberg lettuce, cottage cheese, and pallid canned pears crowned with a dollop of mayonnaise and a sprinkle of grated orange cheddar.

“Eat,” Marga said to Nancy and began forking delicate loads of cottage cheese and bits of pear between her coral lips. “It’s delicious.”

“I want a cheeseburger.”

“If you keep eating cheeseburgers you will look like a cow. Do you want to look like a cow? Who will want to marry you?”

Nancy glared down at her plate. She was angry and embarrassed, breathing through her nose, shallow, fierce, small huffs. Suddenly she felt her mother’s hand close on hers under the table, nails dig into her skin.

“I can’t take care of you forever,” Marga said.

   
In the apartment’s short hallway Nancy stood quietly as Marga unwrapped the scarf, gently removed her tam and then knelt and unbuttoned her coat.

“Mrs. Sheminsky says you haven’t been practicing. If you don’t practice, you won’t improve.” Marga gestured to the piano in the living room, a tall, ancient upright with a spongy intonation. The hammers hit the strings with a little thoof, as if they were wearing tiny terrycloth slippers. Atop the piano was a crocheted runner and plastic busts of famous composers—a glowering Beethoven, a waif-like Chopin, and a seemingly inebriated, wild-haired Liszt.

Nancy sat at the piano, and Marga examined the sheet music she’d brought home from Binzer Music House up on 85th Street, volumes of Brahms, Chopin, and Schubert, most of them beyond Nancy’s ability.

“Try the Chopin,” Marga said, smoothing the pages of a waltz on the music stand.

Nancy arranged herself on the bench as Mrs. Sheminsky had taught her and began the piece. She was still galled by Marga’s pinch in the diner. She let the Chopin hump along like a heavily burdened beast and then jerk to a halt under her fingers.

“It’s too hard. I can’t.”

“Just the melody,” Marga coaxed. Nancy sighed and began picking out the tune with her right hand while Marga sang along. Dahdidum tadum, dahdidum tadum.

“The Chopin’s not hard,” Marga said, “and he had such little hands, like yours. Play the Nocturne, not that one, this one, E Flat. I played it, you know. But with more feeling. When I played it I put all my heart into it.”

Nancy shook her head. Marga stood waiting. Nancy didn’t move. Marga began sorting music books on top of the piano. She shifted the positions of the plastic busts of Beethoven and Liszt, as if they were king and castle on a chessboard. Nancy remained immobile, stiff with outrage. Finally Marga leaned over and slowly lowered the lid of the piano over the keys and left Nancy sitting on the bench.

   
On Friday, while Marga was still at work, Nancy walked up to Binzer House to buy the sheet music for the Liebestraum.

“Do you want the big-note version?” Mrs. Binzer asked.

Nancy shook her head. “The real one.”

Mrs. Binzer efficiently strummed through the scores standing upright in the bin marked L and then pulled out a thin booklet and handed it to Nancy. On the cover a handsome bewigged lady languished on a divan, a pink rose in full bloom trailing from her hand. Inside, the pages were crammed with dense legions of notes.

“That’s very hard for a young girl,” Mrs. Binzer said.

“I can play Chopin,” Nancy said coolly.

   
Seated at the piano, Nancy began with the right hand, her fingers lurching up and down the swallow-flights of notes. It took half an hour to plod across seven pages. Her head ached, but she turned back to the first page and began again. The rise and swell of the arpeggios, the steady ring of the embedded melody, were incantatory. Three hours later, the sound of her mother’s key in the front door lock startled her from her trance. She pulled the music from the rack and hid it in the piano bench.

Wednesday’s piano lesson was a disaster. Arthur wasn’t home and Nancy couldn’t concentrate on the simple skittish caprices and sonatinas from her Faber Piano Adventures book.

“Do you remember anything I said to you last week?” Mrs. Sheminsky chopped her hand on Nancy’s shoulder to keep time and poked her with the red pencil when she stumbled.

A full report was made to Marga when she came in. Nancy stood in the hall, ashamed and miserable, and watched Mrs. Sheminsky trace a tune from The Merry Widow out on the keyboard while Marga dug into her bag until she found a satin change purse safety-pinned to the lining.

“You know I don’t have much, Mrs. Sheminsky,” Marga said as she counted out twelve dollar bills.

Mrs. Sheminsky nodded, as if to acknowledge the necessary evil of payment for services rendered, thumping out the waltz as she watched the bills being laid down, out of the corner of her eye.

“Tell her to practice, or she won’t get better, not one iota.”

   
The bus shambled through the dim park, sinking into the darkness of overpasses and bridges, coming back up into pink twilight. Marga was angry and silent. Sy had given her $60 to last the rest of the month. She was deep in anxious calculations when Nancy spoke up.

“Is Arthur your boyfriend?”

“Arthur,” Marga scoffed.

“I saw him touch you.”

“No you didn’t.”

“He touched you,” Nancy insisted.

“You didn’t see anything.”

“I did.”

“Do you know what I do for you?” Marga hissed. “What I do?”

“I don’t care,” Nancy snapped back. Marga was shocked by the look Nancy gave her, dark and resentful, just like Sy. Marga had worked hard to dispel Sy from their lives, so that he was more like a rumor than a father, and then suddenly he was there in her daughter’s face.

She reached out and slapped Nancy, as if this would send the Sy in her sprawling. A rumble of disapproving sounds came from the other passengers on the bus. Marga got off at Fifth Avenue and they walked the rest of the way home. She pulled the loudly sobbing Nancy behind her for seven long blocks.

   
Back at the apartment, in the room she and Nancy shared, Marga lay down on her bed. She could hear Nancy crying in the living room. She turned on the radio that sat on her nightstand, a Zenith Trans-Oceanic 3000-1, advertised as The World’s Most Magnificent Radio; it was a simple box, silver and black plastic casing with a leather back, that could pull voices from the ether. Long after Nancy was asleep in her bed, Marga would listen to her radio. She steered the tuning dial and voices came to her in the darkness as if she had called them. Once she found a boys’ choir from Moscow singing patriotic songs in pure collective ecstasy. Once a Cuban broadcast of Havana doo-wop heartthrobs crossed 90 forbidden miles of ocean to sing to her, mi corazón, mi amor, mi corazón.

There had been one restless night when in her agitated twisting of the dial Marga had found the voice of Sir Winston Churchill, a recording of a wartime broadcast, and lying back she’d listened to his deep rolling song. “We shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.” It sounded biblical to her, like something a prophet would say. Isaiah. And with his name she inadvertently summoned a memory of her father keeping vigil by the wireless until he could find a BBC broadcast. “We will be saved,” her father had told her. But he was wrong.

Marga could hear Nancy in the living room, the short sharp intakes of breath like Morse code that signaled an end to her crying. She turned the dial of the radio back to the place where she’d once found Winston Churchill, but he wasn’t there.

   
Marga let Nancy stay home from school the next day. Nancy lay in bed while Marga brought her offerings; a glass of ginger ale, a cup of tea, soda crackers.

“You can listen to the radio if you’d like.”

Nancy kept her eyes closed.

“Csokolom, I kiss you, my darling.”

After Marga left for work, Nancy went to the piano. She imagined herself on stage circled by spotlight, in a silky black dress, hair flowing thickly down her back. She didn’t look like herself, but she knew that she was herself. And Arthur sat in the front row. Nancy had discovered a section inside the Liebestraum when the sweeping runs of notes fell silent and the melody sang itself simply and sweetly, and this is what she played for the audience and Arthur. Bent over the keyboard, she watched the movements of her hands. They swept around in circles, seemed to be mixing the notes like the ingredients in a secret potion, a philter that would draw love and admiration to her.

   
When they arrived at Mrs. Sheminsky’s the next Wednesday, the door was open and the piano teacher’s chair empty. Marga called out and Mrs. Sheminsky sailed out of Arthur’s bedroom, bosom thrust forward, waving a dishtowel as if she were surrendering at sea.

“Mrs. Levy, thank God. Help me. Arthur is sick.”

“Not sick,” Arthur called from his room.

“What is it then, are you drunk?”

Arthur swayed into sight and leaned on the doorframe. “I’m fine.”

“Does he look fine?” Mrs. Sheminsky demanded and then began weeping into the dishtowel. Marga said she would make coffee and led Mrs. Sheminsky toward the kitchen, leaving Nancy standing in the middle of the living room.

“What’s up, kitten?” Arthur, with his hands stuffed deep into his bathrobe pockets, did a wobbly, flat-footed shuffle toward her. He circled Nancy, kissed the top of her head, and then danced toward the piano.

“Today’s lesson,” he warbled in his mother’s elderly tremolo, “Chopin’s Waltz in A Minor.” He sat down on the bench and gave a melodramatic account of the familiar waltz, accompanied by theatrical grimaces and extravagant pauses when his hands would leave the keyboard and flutter over his head. Nancy giggled.

“Oh, you like that,” Arthur said, arching one eyebrow, and then called out “Fats Domino,” and gave the waltz a churning boogie-woogie bass line while he sang the melody in dwat dwat dwats like a muted trumpet. Nancy had never seen Arthur play. She moved shyly, bouncing to the beat of his left hand thundering up the keyboard, pulling the notes out of the piano.

“Count Basie,” he announced and ruffled the waltz delicately into a slow blues swing. He closed his eyes and his body settled into the commodious spaces between downbeats. Nancy hovered next to his right shoulder. He rocked side to side and with each languid sway his right arm bumped up against her belly.

“Yeah man,” he rasped.

Nancy flushed with a new feeling. She wanted to touch him. She leaned forward and her head almost came to rest on his shoulder when he yelled “Little Richard,” and she jumped back with a little surprised scream. He began pounding on the piano. The melody of the waltz was lost completely in the throb and velocity of the sound.

“I got a gal…I got a gal…,” Arthur shouted.

“ARTHUR!” Mrs. Sheminsky shrieked. She stood in the kitchen doorway, clinging to Marga. Arthur stopped playing, stuck his hands back into his bathrobe pockets.

“Sorry, Ma.”

He slumped toward his room and then turned and smiled at Marga. “You should come to the Gaslight. We play every weekend. Or you could come to rehearsal in the afternoon. We could get a cup of coffee.”

He threw a dazed smile at the room in general and then disappeared. Mrs. Sheminsky declared she couldn’t possibly teach, and Marga and Nancy hurried from the apartment.

Marga planted Nancy under the awning of Barney Greengrass and went inside. Nancy stared into the cooling dusk of Amsterdam Avenue, and then Marga flew out the door of the restaurant and launched herself down the avenue in a fruitless search for Sy, in bars and coffee shops until they reached Columbus Circle. Nancy drifted behind her, moving through the rich rose of twilight with her hands pressed firm into her coat pockets mouthing “I’ve got a gal I’ve got a gal” behind her woolen scarf.

“Are we going to see him?” she asked her mother on the bus.

“I don’t know where he is.”

“At the Gaslight Club.”

Marga ignored her. She seemed to be dangling from the top of the bus, as if the overhead strap were a gallows. At their stop, she climbed stiffly off the bus and marched up Second Avenue.

“Are we going to go?” Nancy worried at her mother but Marga wouldn’t answer. In the apartment she took off her shoes and sat on her bed, her eyes closed.

“Mommy,” Nancy pleaded.

“If my father had lived, he would kill your father.”

“Can we go?”

“Ach, Nancy, who has time for such stupidity.”

In her bed Nancy imagined Arthur, his lips, his dark hair, the curl that fell on his forehead like Elvis, his strong hands straddling octaves up the piano, his soulful braying. Her longing for him pained her.

She turned over on her stomach. What would it be like to kiss him? She pursed her lips and pressed them into her pillow, and accidentally inhaled a fold of linen case into her mouth. She turned onto her back and glanced over at her mother. Marga wore a sleep mask to bed. It was satin, embellished with lace, and bore a print of two cat-shaped, heavily shadowed and mascaraed eyes that stared unblinking into the darkness.

When she was sure from the steady movement of her chest that Marga was asleep, Nancy turned on her side and began to stroke herself, breasts and hipbone, and then stuffed her hand between her legs. An innervated shock passed through her so sharply that at first she thought it was pain, the only thing she had ever felt like it. She took her hand away and then put it back and felt the same concussion of current.

“Nancy?” Marga was standing over her bed, sleep mask pulled up to her forehead. “What are you doing, are you touching yourself? Let me see your hand.” Nancy looked at Marga’s hand held out expectantly, waiting for her own to be given, investigated, and found guilty.

“No.” Nancy tried to arrange her face into a grimace of shock. “That’s disgusting.” She closed her eyes to signal that she was going back to sleep but Marga didn’t go away. Instead she sat on the edge of Nancy’s bed and reached out to touch her hair.

“What’s the matter, darling, do you think I don’t love you?”

“Leave me alone,” Nancy groaned and pulled her knees up, making herself into a tight, inaccessible ball.

   
Nancy could think of nothing but Arthur. She wanted to go to him. She would go to him, without Marga.

While her mother worked on Saturday, Nancy took the Six downtown and walked from Grand Central Station into the commercial grid of the Fur District. The streets were empty and the shops closed. They must get all their mannequins from one place, Nancy thought. In every window, white featureless creatures posed like humans; small-breasted, sleek and sway-backed, one arched foot thrust suggestively forward, arms outstretched and elegantly arranged, the hands just a suggestion of hand with indentations that indicated fingers and opposable thumb. Fur coats and stoles draped their white lacquered torsos; mink, red fox, and seal skin. Mink turbans capped their long oval heads.

The door to the Gaslight Club was unlocked and Nancy walked into the foyer, past the maître d’s empty lectern and through the door to the bar, which swung shut behind her, snuffing out the afternoon light. The room was empty, lit only by a few sconces, but just as she imagined it would be, dark and glamorous, booths and walls upholstered in burgundy velvet. Tiers of tables covered with clean white cloths rose from the gleaming wooden dance floor. A faint glimmer ahead proved to be champagne glasses stacked in a pyramid on the bar. The stage was a bare black box, behind it a pleated black curtain. Nancy hesitated, and then resolved to just look behind the curtain. After that she would leave.

On the other side of the curtain the stage door was open, framing the sinking sun. There were more rows of tables and chairs, but these were broken, listing, chipped, lamed. A pile of broken glass was corralled against the far left wall by a push broom. In the far right corner Arthur was sitting on a broken-down half-shell booth, covered in gold velvet. He seemed to be sleeping, his mouth open, his lips white and dry.

“Arthur,” Nancy whispered. He opened his eyes and looked up at her.

“What?” He licked his lips and moved his jaw back and forth like he was trying to see if it still worked. “What are you doing here? Where’s your mother?”

“I came to see you? You asked me.”

“By yourself?” Arthur’s head rolled on the torn fabric, tilted back like he was sunbathing. “Yeah,” he said after a few dry swallows. “Yeah, I meant your mother.”

Nancy flushed, heat beating hard into her cheeks, her stomach clenched, she set her jaw to keep her lip from quivering. She couldn’t speak; her voice was wedged into a tiny crevice in her throat.

“But sit down, siddown.” He patted the booth seat, raising a cloud of dust. Nancy, resisting the urge to brush off the velvet, sat carefully next to him. Arthur sighed and his eyes began to flicker like a gutting candle. Nancy watched him drift off. She sat in stillness. Everything seemed to get heavier, the silence, their breathing; the air itself seemed to be pressing them down into the couch.

She sat until the sun went down. She didn’t want to be afraid. She’d felt bold taking the train downtown by herself, walking down the unfamiliar streets, finding the club and crossing the darkness to find him. And now Arthur lay placidly next to her, close enough for her to kiss. And he was asleep. She tried to work up the courage to lean forward and press her mouth against his, but couldn’t. She was considering whether she should wake him when she saw a glimmer of light reflecting off his open eyes. Now, she thought. It will happen now. She waited. Arthur leaned toward her, but instead of kissing her, he pawed clumsily at her skirt, pushing it up over her knee. His hand slipped between her legs and scrabbled against the inside of her thigh. She looked down and saw him kneading the crotch of his pants lazily.

“It don’t want to get hard when I’m high,” he said. He sounded sad. Nancy moved her legs slowly out of his range until his hand flopped down on the seat and his fingers plucked at the worn fabric. She stood up and without looking back walked out the stage door and down the alley.

   
Marga wasn’t home yet. Nancy sat down at the piano and pressed the keys softly and deliberately so that they made no noise, the hammers stopping short of sounding the strings. She cried a little, though not as hard as she thought she should if her heart was breaking.

She took a bath and was stepping out of the tub when she heard Marga come in from work. Covering herself with a towel she walked out of the bathroom and saw Marga sitting on her bed, her hand resting lightly on the radio dial, letting it roll across frequencies like a planchette on a ouija board.

“Shhhh,” Marga said suddenly, as if Nancy were speaking. “Listen. Judy Garland.” The voice sobbed, the strings faded out and the trumpet came in with a grievous lament.

“Life is bare, gloom and misery everywhere,” Marga sang, swaying like a mourner over an invisible body.

She stopped singing and looked up at Nancy. “What’s the matter, darling? Come here.” Nancy walked to her mother and Marga pulled Nancy between her knees, took the towel from her hand, folded it into a large square, and began dabbing Nancy’s calves and thighs. “Like this,” Marga said. “If you rub, your skin will be rough, and then who will want to marry you?”

Nancy stood naked and let her mother pat the water from her skin. It was a gentle pressure, light as rain. Over time it would erode a canyon in her.