If God had found a reason to take a snapshot of Paradise, it would have shown Main Street to be the trunk of an evergreen, roads sprouting like boughs so ragged and droopy the whole thing resembled a Christmas tree left by the curb. Once, fifty resorts had decorated the branches of Paradise. Now, the remains clung to the roads like cracked, fading baubles. That December afternoon in 1978, as I drove with my mother to our family's hotel, I counted nine victims of Jewish lightning, the freakish force that strikes only vacant resorts with no chance for profit except from insurance. ("Hey Solly, I was upset to hear about your fire." "Shh!" whispers Sol, "it's not until tomorrow.") Patches of snow drifted over charred beams; the chimneys had fallen and lay in jutted curves like black spinal columns.

Most of the resorts had simply been abandoned. The main houses stood, but the stucco had peeled from beneath the windows and these looked out beyond the gates like haunted eyes. Handball backboards poked up from overgrown fields, warped plywood tombstones inscribed in flaking paint with the names of the dead.

As we drove past the backboard for Fein's Hillside Manor, I thought of my fight in first grade with Jeff Fein.

"The Eden's a shit house," Jeff hissed across our table in art class. "The pool's cracked. The food stinks!"

In my rage, I hammered Jeff again and again in his pudding-soft stomach until he recanted. Now, it seemed my blows had battered not Jeff, but his parents' hotel. Contrite, I admitted that Fein's Hillside indeed had been superior to the Eden, at least in regard to the cheesecake it served, the parquet floor in its lobby, and the slide by its pool – a white bow of steel that shone, iridescent, when the sun hit just so. I took no satisfaction that the Manor's pool was now gruesome with tree limbs, the lobby long gone.

Just past the Manor the road became a roller coaster. As a child I'd loved to ride in the back seat of our car, especially when my brother, Arthur, was driving. The car would fly over a rise, then drop. Giddy, I would scream out the names on each backboard while Arthur cursed the Eden in a voice that made me think of a radio turned so low you couldn't make out the words, you only knew the announcer was warning of catastrophes to come. Once, I asked Arthur why he drove so fast if he didn't want to get there. "If we have a crack-up," he said, "your mother might give me the afternoon off."

Today, with the roads coated in ice, my mother drove slowly, with great concentration. She was four-feet-eleven and seemed to be using the wheel to do chin-ups. The car barely moved, but she kept asking, Was she scaring me?

No, I was fine.

"But you keep sighing, sweetheart."

I pointed to the wreckage of the once-stately Queen Esther.

"The Esther's been closed for three years," my mother said. "You only noticed it now?"

The truth, we both knew, was that being away at college for only three months had given me the eyes to see my hometown as an outsider saw it – as something dying, or dead. The luckiest resorts had been sold and reincarnated as retreats for Zen Buddhists (the former Green Pastures now sprouted a garden of fat golden statues), rehabilitation centers for drug addicts, sleep-over camps for handicapped children. Not far from the Eden were a Bible school for slow-learning Christians and a retirement home for Jewish vaudevillians.

"These Hasids," I said, "what do they want to do with the Eden, anyway?"

"Sweetheart," my mother said, "we are not meeting this man so we can examine his credentials. We are showing him the Eden, in the best light possible, which probably means we should hope for an eclipse."

"I don't understand why you're so desperate to sell. After all these years, why now?"

"Because I'm old. After all these years, I'm old."

I had been staring at the rotting hotels for so long that when I turned and looked at my mother, the image persisted and she seemed to me as wasted as those ruins by the road. Not that she ever had been a beauty. Her hair was dull brown. The center of her mouth was a smear of red lipstick; frown lines descended half an inch from each end. For the tour, she had put on a skirt as shapeless and drab as a grocery bag, white anklets, loafers, a mangy camel coat. Still, she always had been plump, with the blush of a peach. Now, a dried fig.

"Did something happen?" I said. "Since I went away, I mean?"

"I appreciate the concern." She tightened her lips to demonstrate that she didn't value my concern in the least. "It's your father," she said. "He's not a young man."

In the three seasons of the year when the Eden was closed, my father taught cooking at the county voc-ed school, preparing his students to be chefs at hotels that no longer existed. They were tough kids, rambunctious. He used to come home at night exhausted, tug off his support-hose and fall straight into bed. Was he more tired these days? Did he doze as he lectured, head dipping forward into a soup pot?

A jeep with an upraised plow rounded the curve ahead of us and charged, furious at our red station wagon. My mother dropped the full force of her body onto the brake, then swiveled in her seat to make certain that the jeep wouldn't turn and charge again. I asked if she thought my grandmother would agree to sell the Eden.

"She can't run it herself. If we refuse, she has no choice."

"She could conjure her imps and demons to help her."

My mother frowned. "Your grandmother is a strong woman. Hasn't your generation made that a virtue?"

"You know you'll miss it," I said.

"*You'll* miss it. Not your father and myself. Remember last summer, when the stove blew up? I had to drive into town, fry enough *pirogen* for fifty-three people, then rush back to the hotel before they got cold. And dinner! A dozen pullets from that oven!"

"You're pretending. You really do love it."

"I did love it, at one time. When your grandfather was alive. I mean, when he was *living*. You have no idea what influence he had over people. They would be bickering, complaining. Then he would start to mingle, and before you knew it, they would be in tears, that's how hard they were laughing. As crazy as it was, with him it had spirit."

I would have reminded her that her father would sooner have sold his wife than his hotel, but just then we passed the handyman's cabin, white in the mist, and the argument turned to dust in my throat. In my months in New York, I had come to suspect that I had imagined my childhood trips to this shack. I had lived in a fairy tale, inventing a prince I could save from bewitchment so he could confirm I was nobility myself, as no one else would. A daydream. A lie. And yet here was the cabin, solid wood after all.

The station wagon pirouetted across the Eden's parking lot like an ungainly skater. It skidded to a stop and my mother got out and minced across the frozen mud to the gate. I followed her, then stopped in the middle of the rutted lot and looked up.

Seeing the Eden without its camouflage of leaves was like glimpsing a family friend in a doctor's office, naked beneath the harsh lights. More than ever I wished the Eden had been as successful as That Other Hotel – my grandmother wouldn't allow us to say its name in her presence – that splendid city on the hill, which started from beginnings as humble as ours but had only grown larger, more famous and more elaborate as the Eden decayed.

For fifty-nine years my grandmother had vetoed every im-

provement, living in the hope that her husband would sell the Eden and take her back to New York, to resume his position as foreman at a factory that made ladies' coats, as he was when she had met him, before he had been "bitten by the hotel bug," as Grandpa Abe put it. **("A** bedbug!" she screamed. "That's all that bit you!") But after Abe's stroke, she realized that the Eden was all she would ever possess on this earth. She refused to consider selling it; the one time my parents dared to broach the subject of what they might do if they "got a good offer," my grandmother cursed and used the cleaver she'd been holding to hack a game hen in two.

I didn't want to think what or whom she might cleave if she looked out her window and noticed her son-in-law leading a Hasid around her hotel. My parents' plan was this: my mother and I would keep Nana diverted while my father took the Hasid on a lightning-quick tour. When all that remained was a matter of blackmail ("Here, sign this paper, or we'll let it sit idle and you won't get a cent"), they would hide Nana's knives and hope for the best.

My mother and I set off for the bungalow. The doorbell was useless. My grandmother was deaf, and, though my mother had the key, this still left the problem of how to make contact – if Nana were startled, she might assume a burglar had sneaked up behind her and roundhouse the culprit. The trick was to warn her by stomping your feet like an African hunter beating the bush.

We expected to find her in the stuffy back room where she passed the long winters like the miller's daughter, spinning straw into gold, or rather, converting a room full of garbage – milk bottles, flour sacks, bread wrappers, corn husks, wooden crates and dyed elbow-macaroni – into lamps, cushions, bath mats, night tables, vases, and items that seemed to have no other purpose than to keep the guests guessing as to what these might be. She'd also painted the artwork on the Eden's

lobby walls: Queen Elizabeth on horseback, fox hunts, a chopping block in the Tower of London, various earls, dukes and knights, all of these copied from a book about England, as colorful as my grandmother's palette allowed. If she caught a guest staring at a painting, she would shout: "I used to live there!" and explain that her family spent a year in Liverpool on their way to New York. "The first day of school, naah, I can't say good morning in English. By the last day, Charles Dickens! The Round Table! Shakespeare! The teacher, she said I was a genius. In America, naah, I sew buttons on coats." She tapped the Queen Mother on her reddish-green nose. "She got nothing I don't!''

In the workshop we found a half-finished picture of Buckingham Palace made of dried split-peas and beans. But no Nana, anywhere.

"I don't think she went for groceries," my mother said. The cupboards were full of baby food, which, since my grandmother wouldn't pay for dentures, was all she could eat. "I'd better take the car and go find her. You stay here and warn your father."

I never had felt any great love or admiration for my grandmother. But, standing in her workshop that wintry afternoon, I experienced the unsettling sensation we were on the same side.

"Don't you feel guilty doing this?" I asked.

With a look that implied I was too smart to understand anything of consequence, my mother left me to contemplate the murky turpentine in a jar labeled STRAINED BEEF, the pile of dried peas, Nana's brushes and paints. The fumes burned my nostrils, and I finally escaped and skated down the path to wait for my father.

An iron arch spanned the walk, obscured by a chaos of warped wooden signs. The pictures showed primitive talent, though the artist since had turned to more regal subjects. At

the center of the arch hung a painting of a couple in flesh-colored bathing suits. The tree in the background suggested these weren't ordinary guests, as did the red blob (a beach ball? some kind of fruit?) the woman was tossing toward the man. THE GARDEN OF EDEN it said below this couple, and, below that: YOUR HOSTS ABE AND JENNIE APPELBAUM, with APPEL much fatter so no one could miss the pun at the core of the owners' name. To the left of this sign hung a golfer in knickers, huge as Paul Bunyan compared to the forest and lake at his feet. EIGHTEEN-HOLE GOLF COURSE it said, though the sign didn't reveal that the golf course was public and twelve miles down the road. More truthful were the promises Of SHUFFLEBOARD, BASEBALL, HEALTHFUL POOL, TV (honest enough in its singular number) and NITELY AMUSEMENT. At the far right, a chorus of cows, fish and hens raised their mouths and beaks to sing THREE MEALS A DAY, VERY STRICT KOSHER. And there, across the top: ALL THOSE WHO ENTER LEAVE YOUR CARES HERE. I reached up and stroked Adam's smooth chest, Eve's wavy hair, the apple tree, the apple, the pale lemon sun.

I always suspected I had been chosen by God for some special fate, but I didn't receive proof until I was nine. It was summer, mid June. Where could death hide on such a bright morning? Nowhere, I thought, and poked one bare foot out the bungalow door. How soft the grass looked! I longed to turn cartwheels, climb the old oak, perform a few miracles to take up the hour until the pool opened and I could show off my new lime-green two-piece.

"No," my mother told me. Her fingers closed around my suit straps.

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Put on your shoes first."

I wrinkled my nose.

"You heard me, Miss Piss."

In my mother's opinion, deadly microbes were breeding in every warm puddle. The germs of paralysis were tiny sharks teeming in each muddy drop.

"If you go around barefoot, you might pick up TB."

For years I had assumed she was saying Tee Vee. The current ran through the earth like a snake of hot sparks. If you stepped on the snake with bare feet, the pictures shot to your brain. One afternoon, when my mother wasn't looking, I took off my sneakers and searched for the spot. I planted my right foot, paused, saw no pictures, planted my left foot a few inches over, stepping and pausing until I had signed every patch of the Eden with my footprints. But I couldn't find the current. I even tried pressing my ear to the ground and listening for voices – Fred, Ethel, Rickie, and the red-headed Lucy for whom I had been named, or so my brother told me.

I kept doing this until Arthur discovered me down on all fours, ear to the ground. He jumped on my back and wouldn't let me up until I admitted what I was doing. Then he laughed so convulsively I could feel my body shake beneath his. He sputtered his last laugh and took pity on me, explaining the truth: that our family's hotel once had been a refuge for patients who coughed furiously and spat blood until they choked, eyes bulging, tongues black. Their mucus, Arthur told me, still wriggled with germs, which waited to crawl in the blisters on my feet. He thought this would scare me, but it excited me to think that the Eden was haunted with dead people's germs, and these lived on, unseen, awaiting a chance to make contact with me, inhabit my blood.

"Put your shoes on this minute," my mother ordered, "or no swimming for a month."

I didn't bother to tell her that I wasn't afraid of catching tuberculosis. What would that matter? TB was only one of a hundred virulent devils waiting to prey on a girl in bare feet.

"If you step on a rusted nail you'll get lockjaw."

I savored this tragedy. Arthur would be chasing me across the front lawn. I would step on a nail and stumble. He would catch me and threaten to pull down my bathing suit, as he often had done before, and when I tried to beg for mercy my jaw would lock shut. Slowly, he would realize what dreadful affliction had silenced his sister. He would beg my forgiveness, which of course I wouldn't grant.

Not that I believed I would die. How could such puny villains – a microbe, a nail – strike down a girl of rare visions and dreams? If anything, I sensed on that brilliant June morning not death but a challenge, an occasion to prove my powers at last.

I put on my flip-flops and dodged past my mother.

"Come back here!" she shouted. "Those things are so flimsy, a piece of glass could go through!"

But she didn't have time to run after me and tie real shoes on my feet. Flip-flops smacking against my heels, I ran to the camp house, an unpainted shack with a dozen old mattresses piled high inside. The raw wooden walls were inscribed with the signatures of campers now in their fifties: YUDEL LOVES EDITH; SHEL CLOBBERED MILTIE 8/10/32. Standing on my toes, I was just able to reach the top cubbyholes. Wasps dove from the eaves, but I wasn't afraid. I had given them instructions to strafe all intruders and leave me unstung. From the only cubbyhole with a door I withdrew a shabby book – a present from my Grandpa Abe the year before, on my eighth birthday. He had bought it for himself when he arrived in America; he wanted to own a copy of the Bible in English, and the bibles for adults were too hard to read. OLD TESTAMENT FOR CHILDREN, EDITED, ABRIDGED the title said in block letters. **A** smiling man and woman posed behind a tree; I recognized them as the couple tossing the beach ball on the Eden's main arch. In his soft stumbling voice, my grandfather started to read

aloud the story of Moses. I interrupted to ask why he pronounced the *w's* as *v's.*

"Vell," he said. A troubled look passed his face. He leaned forward, the book slipping from his lap. He opened his mouth to speak, and I sat waiting for an answer until my parents appeared in the doorway with a cake, which we didn't get to eat. Though my grandfather lived on another eleven years, he couldn't move or talk, so it seemed to me as if God bestowed the Torah, not on Moses, but on me, Lucy Appelbaum, then He lay down to sleep while I studied His gift, preparing for a test I knew would come soon.

The more I read the Bible, the more I believed that Moses and I were two of a kind. Hadn't a bush with flame-red leaves ordered me to kneel beside the shuffleboard court because the ground there was holy? And that same afternoon, hadn't a radio emitted a wail, after which the announcer, in his resonant voice, commanded me to await instructions regarding the mission God had reserved especially for me? I heard God speaking often, praising my deeds. In return, I asked Him favors: *Please, God, let the sun stand still so I can swim one more hour.* My prayers sometimes worked, but never when any witness was near.

And this was the puzzle that occupied my mind in the camp house that morning: How could I prove how special I was if no one required the knowledge I had gleaned from my book? I lay on my back, studying the baffling words above the toilet, preparing for the day I would be called upon to translate some other warning God had written on a wall, as Daniel, my hero, had been asked to explain **MENE** MENE TEKEL **UPHARSIN** to wicked King Belshazzar.

"Attention, attention!" My mother's voice rang from loudspeakers on poles all over the Eden's grounds. "Ladies and gentlemen, the pool is now open for your aquatic enjoyment."

I replaced my book in its cubbyhole and jumped down the four steps. Slowed by my flip-flops, I left these behind, two

bright crimson footprints in the middle of the walk. Beside the pool, I paused on the hot concrete deck – good training, in case I was ever flung into a burning furnace, like Daniel. Then, with a cry, I raced to the edge and threw myself over.

Cold as perfection. I frog-kicked underwater. When I emerged I felt cleansed, though of what I wasn't sure. Maybe the chlorine would sterilize my skin so no ugly hair would sprout between my legs, as it did from the crotches of the women on the lounge chairs, black tendrils creeping down puckery thighs. I levered my body to the deck, exalting in the strength of my lean, freckled arms. I pinched my nose, rubbed it – if Arthur saw snot, he would blow his whistle and call out his findings to the busboys. The pool walls were painted turquoise, the water reflecting the sun like an enormous gem sunk in the pillowed acres of the Eden. The pool didn't have a lifeguard (SWIM AT OWN RISK warned a sign), but my brother had the job of keeping the water clean, and he cleared debris from the surface as obsessively as he scrubbed blackheads from his face. He dumped in chlorine until any moth or beetle fluttering too near dropped like a stone.

I breathed deeply, then dove. Emptying my lungs, I sank to the bottom, where I lay with the rough concrete scraping my belly. My blood throbbed loudly in my ears, the watery world pulsated with the question: *How long can you stay here, how long, how long. . .*

Forever, I answered. I could live without breathing, explore the world's oceans with no need for tanks. I flipped onto my back and floated there, between the bottom and the surface, the sunlight a spatter of gold drops above, the fir trees curved wings. I told myself that no one had seen the world *this* way.

When I grew bored with floating, I climbed from the pool and tossed a penny over my shoulder. "Arthur! Hey, Arthur! I bet I can find it in less than a minute!"

Not that my brother ever would time me. Not that he ever

paid attention. Like most children, I equated attention with love. But my brother thought the highest form of attention a brother could bestow was relentless correction. And because he did love me, he feared that I would become what he most hated: a woman who thought she was special. He classified people according to whether they demanded special treatment – "Waiter, make sure the fish has no bones!" "I want colder water!" "Artie, get me a fork whose tines aren't bent!" – or whether they sat quietly and ate what they were given. I knew I couldn't please him. From my orange hair to my feet, whose nails I painted red, I was too loud, too brash. But praise is most precious when given by those who dispense it most rarely. If my brother had commended me for finding that penny, I might have become a pearl diver. And when I rose from the depths and saw his turned head, I felt cheaper than the coppery coin in my fist. With no special talents, I must be the same as every other girl, as one drop of water is exactly like the other drops. This scared me so profoundly I had no other choice but to turn to the staff, who paid me attention because my last name was Appelbaum, a fact I tried hard to forget.

I climbed from the pool and shouted insults at the busboys until two of them grabbed me by the ankles and the wrists and – one, two, *three* – tossed me in the depths so water rose from the pool and flattened the hairdos of the women playing cards.

"Lucy! Don't splash!"

To protect their bouffants these women wore kerchiefs with hundreds of petals or tall hats whose filaments waved in the wind like the tentacles of spiny sea creatures. Some women played canasta, tapping spiky heels as they waited for their cards. (Their legs were shot blue, like the celery stalks my teacher had propped in an inkwell the year before, in third grade.) Other women played mahjongg – fast fingers, fast tongues, the ivory tiles clicking: "Twobam," "Red," "Twodot."

But if I drew too near their table, one of these women would grab me by the shoulders, exclaiming *zise mammele tayere* – sweet, dear little mother! – while the other women chimed:

"What bottle did that red hair come from!"

"Someone is going to wake up and find herself with a lovely little shape any day now!"

I was desperate to grow up, but the crepe-papier skin hanging from their necks made me queasy, and I had to admit that growing up didn't stop at fifteen, or even at my parents' age, but kept on and on until you began to grow ***down,*** the women's spines curving until they were shorter than I was.

My only hope that old age needn't be frightening came from the Feidels. Each afternoon they appeared at the pool, Shirley in a trim maroon one-piece, Nathan in trunks neither baggy nor too tight. Shirley had the figure of a much younger woman, with smooth skin and long white hair, which she wore in a bun. Nathan had a thick square-cut silver mustache, a cleft chin and a nose that came straight from his brow. He and his wife would step down the ladders on opposite sides of the pool and, without hesitation, even on the chilliest day, slip into the water and swim toward one another, pass and keep swimming, twenty laps in counterpoint, strong rhythmic strokes, as the numbers on their wrists, written in an ink that never washed off, rose from the water again and again.

When they finished their swim, Nathan and Shirley climbed from the pool. Nathan draped his wife's shoulders with a thick purple towel they must have brought from home since the towels at the Eden were threadbare and white. Then Nat kissed his wife. No parts of their bodies touched except their lips, but I felt so unsettled that after they had gone I was attracted more strongly than ever to the waiters sunning on the deck.

An outsider might have thought the boys were sleeping, but I knew that they were actually using the sun's rays to recharge their batteries. How else could they find the energy to work

seven days a week: out of bed at six to get ready for breakfast, clear the tables, serve lunch, set up for the next meal, a few hours' break before serving dinner, which took until eleven-thirty to clear? The steel trays they brandished might have been shields for an army of knights. Loaded with dishes, such a tray couldn't be lifted by two ordinary men. But a waiter could swing a tray to his shoulder and dart between the tables so the steaming soup flew above the heads of the indifferent diners. I didn't think it fair that the guests, who did no work, should lounge on cushioned chairs while the staff were forced to lie on the concrete deck. When I ran the Eden – and I never doubted that I would – things would be fair.

I stood above Herbie, the knight I loved best, Sir Herbie the Scrub-brush, bristling with black hairs. Beside him lay Larry, with a pink hairless chest and two tiny nipples like pink candy dots, and Steve, Michael, Bruce, all of them sleeping so soundly that I almost regretted what I had to do.

Almost. Not quite. The night before, the busboys had finished work early and decided to hitch-hike to town for ice cream. When I begged to go with them, Herbie said, "Loose, you won't miss much. The waitress at HoJo's will bring us our sundaes. We'll try to imagine what she looks like without that hair net, we'll pass out in our butterscotch syrup, and when the place closes, we'll get up and crawl home."

So why didn't they stay at the Eden, with me, and go to sleep early?

"We have to, that's all." He rubbed the bristles on his chin. "When guys get together, they do certain things. Maybe those things aren't so great. But it's worse for a person to be alone."

This I understood. When no one was watching me, I felt as if my life were a movie projected on thin air.

I scooped icy water from the pool, then uncupped my hands above Herbie's belly. Though he tightened his muscles, his eyes remained shut. I hated myself, but I had to keep going.

The third scoop of water made Herbie reach out and pass me on to Larry, who, in his sleep, passed me on to Steve, who passed me on to Michael, who passed me on to Bruce, whose arms closed around me, a carnivorous plant with a fly in its leaves. I squealed and squirmed with pleasure, flesh to hot flesh, until I heard a whistle.

"Stop that!" Arthur commanded from his lounge near the diving board. "Don't pester them, Lucy. *Go* and play with your dolls."

His voice stung as smartly as if he had squirted chlorine in my eyes. I told myself again that my brother didn't hate me, he hated the hotel. He was always complaining that the Eden was ruining his health and souring "his chances." He couldn't take time off to visit his roommate from his first year at Princeton, though this roommate's family owned a house at a place called Martha's Vineyard. No, Arthur was just too tired to let his love show. Seeing him now, twisting to massage his own knotted back, it came to me that he truly did need me.

I freed myself from Bruce, who immediately rolled over and dropped back to sleep. I took a few steps toward Arthur. I would rub his back and tell him the jokes that Maxxie Fox, the Eden's new comedian, had taught me the day before. I *was wrong,* he would say. *The minute you touched me, the pain dis-appeared.*

I had just reached the diving board when Linda Brush scooted past and settled on the lounge right next to Arthur. How could he stand to have her that near? Linda Brush was one of the middle-aged mothers who brought their children to the Eden for two or three months, leaving their husbands to work and sweat in New York. Her hair was a shiny black ball; a person could poke two fingers in those black-circled eyes, a thumb in that round mouth, and send that head rolling. She wore a two-piece bathing suit much like my own, except black. A scar crawled down her belly. I grew ill, thinking where that

scar led and how the two Brush twins had lived in that stomach until the doctor slit it open and lifted them out.

The twins were identical. As a younger child I had thought this meant they were alike not only on the surface but the same through and through. I couldn't see them lying next to each other without feeling compelled to draw a blanket over one baby's face. Having a twin cheapened your worth; for all anyone could tell, your twin was the real you and you were the fake.

As the Brush twins grew older, I saw, to my relief, that they weren't the same. Samuel, the younger twin, followed Mitchell wherever he went, so dreamy and slow he seemed to be mocking Mitchell the way Arthur mocked me, repeating everything I said with a retarded child's slur. ("Stopdoing that!" I would scream, and Arthur, thick tongued, would mimic "thtopdoing that.") For as long as I knew him, Sam Brush retained an infant's blank face, whereas even by *six* Mitchell had hardened his features, sharpened his gaze, as though to help people tell them apart. Today, he was pressing a scalloped bottle cap into Sam's bare arm, as though cutting dough for cookies. Sam sat there and smiled.

Their mother didn't notice. She was squeezing white lotion across my brother's chest, teasing him about his dark skin and kinky hair. "Why, if Ah didn't know bet-tah, Ahd think one of the Appelbahms had slept with they-ah dah-kies."

Why didn't my brother slap her? He just grunted, and I saw Linda slip her pink nails beneath the waistband of his trunks.

I jumped in the water and started swimming. I wouldn't touch the bottom or the sides. At four o'clock, my mother came to the pool for her one-hour break between managing the reception desk and managing the dining room. She stood beside the water in her rumpled yellow housedress.

"You'rechattering like a skeleton," she said.

"Oh, Mom, how can a skeleton chatter? **A** skeleton is dead."

"Andyou will be, too, if you catch pneumonia."

I swam to the shallow end and climbed the steps as slowly as it is possible to climb steps.

"Quick! Go and change! If you stay in a damp suit you'll end up a cripple."

I rolled my eyes. "How could a damp suit – "

"Sylvia Siskind's daughter got polio from just a quick dip. Of course, that was a public pool. But we don't have to ask for trouble by walking around in damp suits."

I had no intention of changing to dry clothes. I would get a snack. By the time I returned to the pool, my mother would have left or forgotten her order. I hitched up my bottoms, marched across the lawn and right through the lobby, defying a sign that said NO WET SUITS, then I marched out the side door and up to a window in a ramshackle booth called The Concession.

"The usual," I said.

Mrs. Grieben, the concessionaire and sister of the cook, who was also Mrs. Grieben, since the sisters had married brothers, reached one flabby arm into the freezer and brought out a chocolate-covered marshmallow stick so frigid it hurt my teeth to bite it. Then she opened the cooler.

"Orange hair, orange soda," Mrs. Grieben said sagely, as if God had decreed that dark-haired children must drink Coke and blond ones cream soda.

The Orange Crush tasted like summer itself. I gulped half without stopping.

"Who gave you that *chazeray!*"

The voice made the bottle shake in my hand.

"Who gave you that pig food!" My grandmother raised a fist at Mrs. Grieben. "You want her to get fat as a pig, as a *chazer* like you?"

"You don't call me pig!"

"Pig! *Chazer!* Pig!" Nana whirled. "And you! Don't run around barefoot!" She said this in Yiddish – *gey* nit *arum borves* – and I

wanted to laugh because this last word sounded like "boobas," but I knew what was coming.

"You go without shoes, your feet get stepped on!"

I jumped back in time to prevent Nana's heel from grinding my toes. As far as I could tell, this was the only real risk of not wearing shoes.

Nearly everyone I knew was terrified of Nana. As a toddler, Arthur had picked up a block and hurled it at her. He missed; she retrieved it and hurled it right back. Though the block split his scalp, Arthur was too stunned to cry, even when the doctor was stitching shut the wound.

My grandmother couldn't hear a word of bad news my parents shouted in her ear, but let an enemy whisper a disparaging word across the hotel and Nana would scream: "You should burn in Gehenna for such a lie!"

She didn't speak, she ranted, punctuating her sentences with goaty snorts – *naah, naah* – which made me believe this was how she had come to be called Nana in the first place.

"Don't run with that bottle in your mouth, you might trip, naah, naah, you'll knock your teeth out."

"I don't *have* any teeth."

But even when confronted with the gaping truth, my grandmother wouldn't relent. "Stay here until you're finished, naah. You don't walk, you can't fall."

I guzzled my soda and set the bottle on the counter. "I don't think you look like a pig," I assured Mrs. Grieben, then ran back to the pool.

What luck! My mother was playing canasta. I slipped quietly down the steps, but the waves spread like radar.

"Lucy, you'll get cramps!" She turned in her chair. "You need to wait an hour after eating, at least."

"But I only ate soda!"

"Then why is your face covered with chocolate?" She unrolled a tissue from her sleeve. "Here, spit."

I refused; she spit for me, scrubbing my cheeks and the skin under my nose until I could smell my mother's sour saliva. I squirmed free. Had Herbie and the other boys witnessed my shame? No, they had already left to set up for dinner.

"Come on, Mom," I pleaded. "Just a little while? Can I?" I was whining, I knew, but the sun already was touching the hill behind the Eden. "Now? Can I? Please?"

My mother's eyes strayed to the new hand of cards on the table. The other women's heels were tapping the deck. "Oh, all right. Just don't go into the deep end."

"I promise," I said. But even before she had played her first card I had ducked beneath the floats and was heading toward the marker that proclaimed 7 FEET.

The sunbathers were the first to pack up. The pinochle players stubbed out their stogies and hectored their wives into bidding their last hands. The canasta games ended. My mother stood and stretched. She saw me in the water. "Lucy, come out of there this instant!"

"Just one more lap."

"I can't stand here arguing."

Though Nana ruled the kitchen and my father served as her steward, my mother's job was hardest since she mixed with the guests, scurrying from table to table and enduring their complaints about cold soup and spoiled liver. They had paid a flat sum, which earned them the right to gobble all they could, three meals a day. Most of them tried to wolf down enough food to recoup their investment, and, if they could, accumulate interest.

"You're old enough to understand," my mother said. "Even with all our work . . . The prices these days! And how can we pay off our debts if we're only a quarter full? What will your father do, at his age . . . All I ask is, please, don't do so much to aggravate me."

The sadness in her voice made me want to comfort my mother. But before I could climb out, she said, "What's the use?" and hurried off.

Other than the Brush twins, their mother and Arthur, only my grandfather remained at the pool. He lay on a special wheeled lounge chair beneath an afghan his wife had crocheted, the yarn fuchsia, red and orange, a neon advertisement of his helplessness. I liked to sit beside him and tell him the events of my day. My grandfather never teased me. He never was called away to attend to a crisis. I would stretch out beside him and lie without moving to see what it felt like. Arthur, I knew, should already have rolled Grandpa Abe to the kitchen so someone could feed him dinner. Instead, my brother turned his recliner so he and Linda Brush could follow the last rays of the sun.

"I've got to go," he said blandly.

"Your busboy can do what needs doing. You work too hard, Artie. You don't want to die young."

I dove underwater. The surface squirmed with pink and red lines. *I'm a magic fish,* I thought, and swam up to eat the worms, closing my fish lips over every squiggle. When the worms disappeared, I decided to swim the length of the pool one more time and get out. I swam to the deep end, and on my way back was startled to find that someone had joined me. With the sunlight so weak and my eyesight so blurry from all that chlorine, all I could make out was the person's shape. He was smaller than I was, unless this was a trick of the way the bottom slanted.

Whoever it was, he could hold his breath longer than I could. I came up for air. My head and lungs ached, but I dove down again to see who could beat me at this skill that I had been practicing for so many years.

When I saw the boy's face, I was drained of jealousy. *Your lips are blue,* my mother said when I stayed in the pool too long, and I thought that she was lying, but this boy was so blue he

blended with the water. I couldn't pull him up so I dragged him by his shorts. These began to come off, but my feet touched the bottom.

I burst to the surface. "Arthur!"I shouted.

I knew he would come running. I would get all the attention I had ever wanted, though even in that instant I was aware it wouldn't last.

He was there, beside me. He grabbed Sam from my arms – Arthur seemed to leap from the water without touching the wall, and when he laid the boy on the deck I could see that Sam was covered with angry red circles, as if a fish with teeth had sucked him all over. I remembered the bottle cap. "Mitchell,"I said.

Their mother was shrieking. Arthur pushed me away and bent over Sam, one dark palm to the boy's thin blue chest, the hand rising each time Arthur blew in the boy's mouth, though whenever Arthur paused the hand would just lie there. "Get help!" he yelled. "An ambulance!"

If I thought anything at that moment, I thought I could help Sam more by staying than by going. Hadn't I found him and dragged him to safety? If no one else had been there, wouldn't I be the one blowing in his mouth? I tried to remember a prayer from my Old Testament, but all I could think of was, "Please, let Sam live."

"Goddamn it, Lucy!"

Arthur's voice set me moving, but it didn't stop my praying, and ten minutes later, when the ambulance pulled up, Linda Brush was still shrieking and I was still pleading, "God, let him live."

The volunteers carried Sam on a stretcher as Arthur walked beside them, lips pressed to Sam's. Linda Brush ran after them. She tripped on my flip-flops, cursed and got up. I saw blood on her knees. She and Arthur, half-naked, climbed into our Pontiac and followed the ambulance. Only when the siren had died in the distance was I able to stop praying. I saw my

mother and Nana standing at the edge of the road, gesturing crazily at each other.

I walked to my grandfather's lounge. I had been told that he couldn't move, but one of his feet had poked free of the afghan. The ankle was bare, the foot itself covered by a brown backless slipper. I knew that he had a "problem with sugar" and somehow had lost two toes to this problem. I had always wanted to sneak a look at the stumps, but I tucked his leg beneath the afghan.

It came to me that my grandfather must have seen Sam fall into the pool. What did that feel like, straining so hard and not being able to do more than wiggle a foot? My grandfather seemed so helpless I climbed on his lounge and pulled the blanket over us both.

I heard my name. "Lucy!" Then, even more loudly: "Lucy, where are you?" A sharp whistle followed, and more notes, tu-tu-tu-tu.

My mother said, "No, Ma, leave the boy. No. Stop that."

I peeked from the blanket. Nana was holding Mitchell Brush high above the sidewalk, trying to shake the whistle from his clenched mouth.

"Tu-tu-tu-tu."

Nana shook him sharply and the whistle went flying. Mitchell's face was contorted, but he wouldn't cry.

"Stop, Ma, you'll snap something, you'll kill him."

I laid my head against my grandfather's chest. He murmured *there, there,* unless this was only the rumbling of his stomach, and I could feel his cold fingers tracing a message of love on my back.

My mother set the receiver in its cradle as tenderly as if this were Sam Brush himself, safe now in bed.

"He started to breathe in the ambulance," she told Mamie Goshgarian, the Eden's social director. The guests were occupied with dinner. Light broke through the trees surround-