

Catalogue 022
Written 2012
8283 words
31 pages

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HUNGRY HEART

As they came down the wide stone steps of St. Thomas, they could see a bus stopped further up the Avenue and listing slightly to one side. After the darkness of the old cathedral, the cold gray light of early March was so bright it hurt Trisha's eyes. Although it was still early afternoon, the traffic was already bad, and a man with no legs on a skateboard was pushing himself between the stopped cars, shouting obscenities. Trisha felt frightened for him and repulsed all at the same time. But she forgot him at once when, on the step before her, Tante tripped and fell down.

Trisha reached out with both hands, thinking, what foolishness to try to rescue someone so much bigger. Yet she could not help it: whatever hurt Tante, hurt her.

"I'm OK, kiddo," said Tante, using her gruff voice, the one she used when she wanted to sound cheerful but really wasn't feeling cheerful. "Don't bother yourself like that."

She was up already--brushing off her black cloth coat and buttoning it up to her collar, running her fingers over the silver leaf pin as if to make sure it was still there. Her thin lips forced a smile.

"Really, kiddo, I'm OK," said Tante.

She picked up the little black hat in the shape of a beret and tugged it down once more over the short wisps of hair now gray on both sides. When had that gray happened? With its two colors, Tante's hair looked like Trisha's the day Terence Bauer who sat behind her in fifth grade had dunked her braids in the inkwell. It made Trisha's

angry when her father said Tante's hair looked as if it had been combed with an egg beater, but she had to admit that right now, it did.

"Well, kiddo," said Tante. "Don't just stand there looking at me like that. How about we take the 32 bus down to Luechow's and have some of the Fifth Word?"

"Sure," said Trisha, trying not to sound as worried as she was.

At the bottom of the steps, Tante took Trisha's hand. The traffic was moving now, but slowly. At last the light turned.

"Hurry," said Tante, and they began to run.

The Fifth Word was "I thirst," after which the soldiers had given Christ some vinegar to drink on a sponge. Last year Elizabeth Shea had gone with them to hear the Fifth Word at St. Thomas'. She was taller and thinner than Tante and had a bit of black fuzz on her chin. It had been Elizabeth Shea who had given Tante the silver leaf pin. After the Fifth Word they had gone back to Elizabeth Shea's house in Astoria and sat outside under the old lilac tree. Elizabeth Shea had worn a gray dress. Elizabeth Shea's mother had been there, too, a tiny old woman with an afghan over her lap. Every time a breeze blew, the scent of the lilac had fallen down on them. Elizabeth Shea had poured out a drink into small silver glasses that felt cold and heavy in Trisha's hand. Trisha was never sure if she liked Elizabeth Shea, but Elizabeth Shea was Tante's friend so Trisha took a tiny sip. It was a dark thick liquid that made her tongue feel furry the way most of the things grown-ups drank. Tante had gotten up then and gone out to the kitchen to find a ginger ale for Trisha. The others had talked for a long while, although Trisha had not been able to understand much of what they were saying. Tante had laughed a lot--not in the gruff voice but in her soft one, the one that made Trisha happy just to hear. It made Trisha feel happy and peaceful, with the lilac swaying overhead as if in tune with some inaudible, half-remembered lullaby. It made her feel so happy it almost hurt.

"Well, well, kiddo," said Tante, surveying the main dining room at Luechow's with pleasure. "So here we are at last."

Before them, the room of the great restaurant was almost full. As they stood waiting, Tante put out a hand to pull Trisha back. There was a smell of roast meat, cigars, and strong coffee. Waiters were flying down the aisles, each holding a hand high above his head with a tray at the end. Small silver domes rested on the trays, protecting the warm food beneath.

As the head waiter came up, Tante reached deep in the pocket of her dark green checked suit. Then her hand moved toward the head waiter's and gave him something too small for Trisha to see.

The head waiter smiled.

"This way, madam," he said.

"See, kiddo," said Tante, with a wink. "This is why I like to go to the Fifth Word. It lets out early enough he'll give us a good table even if we are only a bunch of women."

And then they were seated, and Trisha was aware of the white starched tablecloth; tiny pats of butter, each with a tulip shape etched on its surface, lying on top of crushed ice in a saucer; on either side of the big white plates, silver--heavy and shiny and cold in the hand.

"The sauerbraten with red cabbage is very good today, Madam," said the head waiter. "Also the Wiener Schnitzel. Would you like something to drink before the meal?"

"We'll have one ginger ale with a maraschino cherry, and one Rob Roy," said Tante. She turned to Trisha as the head waiter put the menu in her hand.

"You have whatever you want, kid," Tante said.

Trisha had already put a pat of butter on the butter plate and broken a saltzstaenger. It seemed a shame to eat it, or the butter--they both looked so pretty.

"How about the sauerbraten, honey?" said Tante. "That's what you had last time, isn't it? The sauerbraten is always good here."

Trisha paused, as if taking time to reflect. Should she have the sauerbraten? She liked it, but it had been a special favorite of Elizabeth Shea's.

Trisha closed the menu.

"I'll have the veal cutlet," she said. "The one with the anchovies and capers and fried egg."

Tante handed her menu back to the head waiter. Then she turned to Trisha and winked.

"I'll decide later--after the next round."

Trisha broke off another piece of the horn-shaped roll, brushing the stray pieces of crusty bread and hard salt bits under her plate. It all would have been entirely wonderful if only Tante had not looked so worn and pale under the silver-tipped hair flying every which way.

"It's not as nice here as at Christmas, is it?" said Tante.

Her voice had gone gruff again.

"Oh, it's nice now," said Trisha, although actually, Tante was right. It was nicer at Christmas, if only because of the famous Luechow Christmas tree--an enormous evergreen with red velvet bows and gold ornaments from the last century and real candles. But Trisha knew what Tante meant. Elizabeth Shea had still been with them at Christmas.

"Well, honey," said her aunt as another waiter set the drinks down before them. "I'm glad you think it's nice here. *Zum_wohl*--I mean cheers."

"Cheers," said Trisha, trying to wink back. Was there something funny she could say? Something that would take the sad look off Tante's face that both frightened and repelled her?

"I guess this is the real Fifth Word," said Trisha.

"You bet," said Tante.

Slowly and deliberately, she took the first sip, staring out over the crowd. Her mouth, bare of lipstick, was set in a straight line, and the short hair framed her face like a child's stick drawing. Trisha thought, and not for the first time, that she looked exactly like Trisha's mother, except that Trisha's mother was pretty.

"Tante, will you take me to Carnegie Hall next winter?" said Trisha. "I saw in the paper that Artur Rubinstein is coming."

"Oh you did, did you?"

Trisha nodded. Tante had given her Rubinstein's recording of the Chopin Waltzes at Christmas, and she had already listened to the Minute Waltz so much that the needle skipped over the first three bars.

"I think I'll be old enough to go to Carnegie Hall by next year," said Trisha.

"Oh you do, do you?" Tante smiled a little, and Trisha felt herself relax.

"Well," Tante went on, still smiling, "we'll have to ask your Mother."

"Can we ask her when we go home?" said Trisha. "Pretty please with sugar on it?"

Tante smiled again, a little wider this time. Her teeth were small and a little bit yellow.

"We'll see," she said, which was exactly what Tante's mother said when she meant *No*, only the way Tante said it Trisha thought she really might see.

"You know," Tante went on, " you should listen to Dinu Lipatti too. His technique is much finer than Rubinstein's. I'll have to get you his recording of the Chopin Concerto in E."

"Oh Tante," said Trisha. "You know that Rubinstein is much more exciting than Lipatti."

As they argued, the sad look went away from Tante's eyes. It was hard to believe, but Tante had been beautiful once. She had played in string quartets and had lots of affairs with men. Trisha's father said so, although Trisha didn't always believe everything he said.

Above them the waiter was standing again, pen poised.

"I'll have another Rob Roy," said Tante. "You can bring the wiener schnitzel for my niece when you bring the Rob Roy."

"Tante," said Trisha, reaching for another salzstaenger and thinking hard.

"What , kiddo?"

"Maybe next year we could bring one of your other friends to the Fifth Word. Rosamunda Nunn, maybe. Or Evelyn Kramer."

A pat of butter dropped off Trisha's knife and fell in one of the glasses of ice water. Trisha watched with horror as it rose to the surface and bobbed about.

"Well, I don't know, kiddo," said Tante, fishing out the butter pat with a salad fork. "Next year is a long way off."

Her lips were set in a line small and crooked as the silver leaf pin.

Trisha could feel her heart sink. Was that what was meant in poetry by "a dying fall"?

"Sure Tante," said Trisha. "Whatever you say."

Trisha's father was shaving while Trisha waited in the next room, which was the kitchen. The house had been originally been for one family, but now it was rented out by floors, as were all the other houses on the block in their Queens neighborhood—one of what New Yorkers called “the outer boroughs.” Trisha's family had the second floor and the attic, which was Trisha's room. It was too hot in summer and too cold in winter but--as Trisha's mother pointed out, at least she didn't have to sleep on the pull-out living room couch like she had in the last place they had lived.

Trisha's father always got to use the bathroom first because he had to be at work before Trisha had to go to school and he had farther to go, too--all the way into the city, even further than St. Thomas. This morning, as usual Trisha's father had taken the portable radio into the bathroom with him. The smooth voice of Pat Boone filled the damp air with "Love Letters in the Sand."

"Goddamn old maids," said Trisha's father, craning his neck down to get closer to the mirror. He was a tall man with dark hair and a small wen on his forehead.

"Goddamn schoolteachers like Elizabeth Shea and Rosamunda Nunn. How the hell does your sister get to know so many schoolteachers anyway when she works at an insurance company? And what kind of church does she take the kid to? Seems pretty Catholic to me, all that crossing and kneeling."

"It's Episcopalian, Karl," said Trisha's mother. "It's very high Episcopalian."

"I'll say it's high Episcopalian," said Trisha's father. "I still don't get it--what's the matter with United Lutheran? Isn't that good enough for your sister?"

"Karl," said Trisha's mother very slowly. "I think that Elizabeth Shea was high Episcopalian."

Trisha's mother sighed as the toast popped, burned on one side, from the toaster. She put both pieces on Trisha's plate, passing them for her to butter.

Trisha's mother was the same height and coloring as Tante and almost the same age. But her hair was still jet black and pulled back tightly behind her ears. Every few weeks she dyed the hairs under her nose with peroxide, holding a piece of cotton under her nose. Was that why she didn't have a beard like Elizabeth Shea?

"So what if Elizabeth Shea was high Episcopalian? What's that got to do with anything? I still don't see why you let the kid spend so much time with your sister. It's not natural. To say nothing of all that awful music."

"Please, Karl," said Trisha's mother. She sighed, although Trisha was not sure whether this was for Tante or because she was tired of listening to Trisha's father.

"You know this is a hard time for Minna," said Trisha's mother.

Trisha's father moved closer to the bathroom mirror, his back crooked even further. He was shaving his chin now. As he leaned his head back, Trisha could see the wen on his forehead. It looked like a little dark bird's egg stuck to his skin.

Trisha finished buttering the toast and got up from the table. In the hallway she stood just back from the bathroom door where her father wouldn't see. In the next room her mother was laying the strips of cooked bacon on paper towels.

There was another song now on the radio:

"Would you like to swing on a star?

"Carry moonbeams home in a jar?

"And be better off than you are?

"Or would you rather be a---"

It made her angry that her father insist on playing that music when he knew she hated it so much. Why was it, that she could not tell him to turn it off?

But she was afraid to say anything: she did not want him to say something even worse about Tante that would hurt her even more.

"I just need to get after her," said Trisha's mother. Her back was to Trisha as she measured out the milk for coffee. "If I can just get Minna to give up the drinking, everything will be OK."

Trisha looked at the little portable radio high above her on the shelf. As she watched, it seemed to her that someone else was reaching, someone else was causing it to topple first on its side and then off the shelf. Pieces of its plastic case scattered onto the floor. At last there was silence.

"What the hell do you think you're doing there, Missy?" said her father, turning around.

Trisha's father stared at her with his dark eyes. Lather streaked across his neck and up his chin. With one hand he held the razor suspended in mid-air.

Trisha moved backwards.

"I'm not doing anything," she said. "It's an old radio. It fell of its own weight."

"Oh what a liar," said Trisha's father. "If you don't watch out, next time you look in the mirror your nose will be longer than Pinocchio's. Jesus Christ! Get me a fresh towel, will you, Lena?"

"Karl!" said Trisha's mother. "Leave the child alone!"

"What do you mean, leave the child alone?" said Trisha's father, aggrieved. "You should tell her to leave me alone."

"I didn't do it!" said Trisha. "Honest! I didn't do anything!"

"Sure," said Trisha's father. "Sure you didn't."

"Karl," said Trisha's mother, handing him the towel. "Please. Breakfast is ready."

"For God's sakes, Lena," said Trisha's father. "Just look what that kid's done to my radio."

Holding a towel to his cheek, Trisha's father bent down and retrieved a triangular shard of plastic.

Trisha turned and ran down the hall towards the living room.

But even there, she could still hear the radio. It was louder now:

"Would you like to swing on a star?

Carry moonbeams home in a jar?

And be better off than you are?

Or would you rather be--a pig?"

Trisha's chest was moving up and down. Each breath came out in little drips, with pauses in between. No matter how hard she tried, she could not smooth it out. Was there no way she could make it normal?

Tante would have winked. Tante would have made a joke. Tante would say, "Good thing you're not a horn player, kid. Horn players need good breath control."

"Trisha," called Trisha's mother. "Come and eat breakfast. The toast is getting cold."

Trisha went into the living room, sat down on the couch, and picked up one of the women's magazines lying on the formica topped coffee table. Women pretty as Trisha's mother with perfect white teeth stared up at her.

"Trisha," said Trisha's mother, coming in from the hallway. She was not smiling but at least she did not look angry either.

"Please come and eat now. Your father won't hurt you."

"I never thought he would," said Trisha.

She put the magazine down and got up from the couch. At last the radio was silent. She began to hum: "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles," which she knew was actually a Chopin Prelude that some Broadway composer had converted to a show tune.

"Well, well, what nice music," said her mother. "It's nice to hear some real music from you for a change."

Trisha's father did not look up as she came in the kitchen. There was a smell of burnt toast and antiseptic and after-shave lotion. The small band-aid on his chin was barely noticeable above his well-pressed suit. He had parted his hair so that the wen hardly showed.

"Trisha, be sure you come right home after school," said her mother. "I know Dorothy Grumbach goes over to the playground with the boys but I don't want you doing that. You hear me?"

"Yes, mother," said Trisha, irritated. She had bit her tongue on the burnt part of the toast, and now it hurt.

"Nice girls don't go with boys to unsupervised playgrounds."

"Well," said Trisha. "We wouldn't want anybody to think I wasn't a nice girl, would we?"

In fourth grade, Trisha had had one boyfriend. Now that she was in fifth grade, she had two. Terence Bauer had ruddy cheeks and a fat behind and liked to hear himself talk. Terence would be a pilot like his father when he grew up. Peter Czerzinski had dark skin and fine, delicate features and had come from some country in Eastern Europe where bad things had happened to lots of people. Terence was what Trisha's father called a loud mouth, but Peter was always quiet. Trisha liked Peter

better than Terence, although she liked having two boyfriends better than one. She liked the way they fought on the way home from school about who got to carry her book bag. Even Pussy Grumbach, who was almost as smart as Trisha but much prettier, didn't have two boyfriends.

It was early April now, late afternoon. Trisha and Terence were standing out in front of the house where Trisha's parents lived. The sun was higher in the sky than it had been all winter, even higher than the apartment house on the other side of Northern Boulevard where Pussy Grumbach lived. Outside Trisha's parents' house, the arch over the stoop was filled with tiny rosebuds. One fell on Trisha's foot as she stood waiting for Terence to say good-bye. The leaves around the bud were torn. As she picked it up, a tiny bug crawled out and dropped to the ground. Still, close to your nose it smelled just like a regular rosebud.

"Did you know that in Alabama you can get married when you're thirteen years old?" said Terence.

He spoke as if he was arguing with someone. It annoyed Trisha that he always spoke that way.

"Oh?" said Trisha. "Married at thirteen? In Alabama? Really?"

She craned her neck. At the corner she could see Peter talking to Pussy Grumbach. They were both laughing as they stood under a maple tree. Every now and then Pussy Grumbach looked back as if to see what was happening with Trisha and Terence. The April sun glinted off Pussy's long brown hair. It was beautiful soft hair--Trisha knew that for a fact. She had helped Pussy put it up in a twist one time. Why was it that Pussy could have a French twist when she always had to have plain old braids?

"Cross my heart and hope to die you can get married in Alabama at twelve," said Terence.

"Well," said Trisha.

"My father said so," said Terence. "He's a pilot, you know. He could fly us there."

"You think so."

"Absolutely," said Terence, nodding his head. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

Trisha stood very still. The sun was making her perspire. A faint scent of roses blew by on the breeze. Why did that make her sad?

"So how about it?" said Terence, looking away. "How about we fly to Alabama and get married?"

Terence puffed his chest out until he looked like a pouter pigeon.

"I don't think so," said Trisha. "I don't think I want to fly to Arkansas and get married."

"Not Arkansas," said Terence. "Alabama."

Down at the corner Pussy Grumbach was leaning up against the wall listening. Peter looked happy. So did Pussy. Trisha hurt. Where was it she hurt? She thought maybe it was somewhere in her heart.

"Why don't you think about it?" said Terence after a minute. "Maybe you'll change your mind."

"OK," said Trisha. "If you say so."

As Trisha came in the door, she could hear her mother calling to her from the living room. The venetian blinds were half-closed, and it was hard to see. What light there was streamed downwards onto her mother's jet black hair, sleek against both sides of her head. As her mother looked up, her lips, pulled thin as Tante's, were dark red.

"Trisha, your father and I have talked about this, and you may not understand exactly but you don't really have to. Now I know Dorothy Grumbach is a very special friend of yours, and I like her too even if your father has some reservations. But both of you are getting to be grown-up now, and we think it's time you called Dorothy by her real name."

Trisha felt sorry for her mother: she looked embarrassed, as if she was saying something she was not sure she believed in.

"I don't get it," said Trisha. "What's wrong with Pussy? Everybody calls her Pussy. It's for pussywillow, because she's soft and pretty like a pussywillow."

"Please, Trisha," said Trisha's mother. She turned her lips inward, then sighed. "I've talked it over with Dorothy's mother and she agrees with us. In fact, she'd been thinking exactly the same thing but she hadn't wanted to say anything, you know."

"No, I don't know," said Trisha. "What's wrong with calling her Pussy?"

"It means something else, too," said Trisha's mother.

"What means something else?"

"Pussy."

Trisha's mother looked away.

"What does it mean?"

"The--the in-between," said Trisha's mother. "Some people think it means the in-between."

"So what?" said Trisha. She felt sick. "Why should I care what other people think it means?"

"Well, it's part of growing up," said her mother. "Grown-ups have to care what other people think. So you'll call her Dorothy from now on?"

And she looked at Trisha with the same dark hair and the same dark eyes as Tante's, only without so much life in them.

Tante and Trisha were walking up to Northern Boulevard to get some beer and pretzels.

It was really springtime now. Trisha's braids swung back and forth in the wind. The trees had big flowing leaves and there was a sweet smell in the air like perfume. Tante kept her hands in her pockets as they walked. She had a little red scarf tucked under her coat collar to keep warm, and her hair was flying about in the breeze. The silver leaf pin sat crooked on her collar.

"When you play that mazurka you should take the middle part much slower," said Tante. "It doesn't have to be in strict rhythm either. It's what's called *rubato*. I'll show you when we get back."

"Tante, I don't think I'm ever going to be really good on the piano. I haven't even finished the first book of Clementi and I'm already twelve. Rubinstein had finished the second book of Clementi by the time he was six."

"Where do you get this nonsense?" said Tante, frowning. Then she said, with sarcasm thick as very cold butter pats: "Of course you won't be any good if you never try."

Trisha watched a whirligig blow by on the wind. It was a seed. Millions of seeds were generated every spring by the maple trees, and the flowers, and the cornfields, and many other things, all over the world. This seed was unlikely to ever become a tree.

More likely it would land on the sidewalk, which was concrete, and die there--although seeds probably didn't die exactly. Why did Nature produce so many seeds that were destined never to become trees? It hurt Trisha to think about them, maybe the same way that headaches hurt her mother.

"Do you know the poem 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed?'" said Trisha. "We learned it this week at school. I liked it a lot."

Tante shook her head.

"I'm sorry, honey," she said. "I was never much for poetry."

They had reached the end of the block. They had gone all the way past Kohlmeier's house, and O'Reilly's, and Kramer's. Now they would turn right and walk under the elevated subway for almost half a mile. Soon a train would rumble overhead, taking people they would never see to places they would never go. Trisha liked to think about that. For some reason the thought of the train excited her.

"So," said Trisha. "Are we going to see Rubinstein this season or not? I listen to the Minute Waltz almost every day now."

Tante shook her head sadly.

"I still think Lipatti is better," she said.

"Maybe," said Trisha.

Whirligigs circled past Trisha's head and went on before them, borne by the breeze.

"No maybe about it," said Tante. "Lipatti's better."

"OK," said Trisha. "So he's better. He's also dead. So we can go hear Rubinstein next winter, can't we? Can't we?"

It was Sunday. Tante had the purple velvet under her chin, so the violin would be comfortable against her throat. She was wearing a pair of black slacks and a tailored blouse. As she played the Irish Reel, Trisha was trying to follow along with an improvised continuo on the old upright piano in the living room. It had been a player piano once but it had been converted for Tante when she was about Trisha's age. After the piano had been converted, Tante had announced that she liked the violin better--which just went to show, Trisha's father said, what a pain in the sitter Tante was, only of course he didn't say sitter.

With his feet up on the formica coffee table, Trisha's father was reading the Sunday newspaper. They had all just finished dinner. A smell of roast pork and overdone cauliflower was still coming from the kitchen, as were the sounds of Trisha's mother doing the dishes.

"Not so fast," said Tante. She changed her fingering and moved the violin higher in the air. "Try it like this."

From the couch there was a rattle of newspapers.

"For God's sakes, Minna," said Trisha's father. "Isn't it bad enough we have to hear you play every Friday evening but you have to spoil Sunday with it as well? Besides which, that damn thing's out of tune again. Even I can hear that."

Tante's face went pale--or rather sallow. Then she looked first at Trisha and then at Trisha's father--or rather, at the newspaper.

"OK, Karl," said Tante.

It made Trisha sad that Tante was using her gruff voice.

"How about a deal?" said Tante. "Get me a beer and I'll tune the fiddle."

"Lena," said Trisha's father, calling down the hallway to the kitchen. "Your sister wants a beer."

"Tante, are you all right?" said Trisha.

Tante's clothes were doing what Trisha's mother called hanging off her. Even though Tante had only had two martinis before dinner, her dark eyes already had that vague, cloudy look.

"Sure, kiddo," said Tante, holding the violin out. Abruptly she sat down and put the purple velvet on her lap, with the violin on top. "I'm always all right. Why wouldn't I be all right?"

"That was a very nice Irish Reel, Tante," said Trisha.

"Oh-ho, Pinocchio," said Trisha's father from the couch. "Your nose must have grown another inch on that one, young lady."

"Thanks, Trish," said Tante. "You played pretty good there yourself."

"There's another," said Trisha's father.

Tante took the beer Trisha's mother handed her and took a sip. Then she hunched her shoulders up like a very old person and stared into space. When she turned to Trisha, her lips were still wet.

Trisha drew back.

"Give me a kiss, will you kiddo?" said Tante. She puckered up. "You still love your old aunt, don't you?"

"Sure," said Trisha, not moving.

Her head felt tight, as if it had a headband on that was too small. Was this what her mother felt when she had headaches?

Then she turned back to the piano and opened "The Fireside Book of Songs."

"Why don't we play 'Down By the Riverside'?" said Trisha. "We can sing it together while we play."

"Sure, kid," said Tante. "Good idea."

Tante sniffed and raised the beer higher. Above the silver leaf pin, her face was flushed and unhappy.

"I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield,

Down by the Riverside,

Down by the Riverside,

Down by the Riverside.

I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield,

Down by the Ri--ii-ver-side."

Tante was frowning with concentration. Below, her foot moved with the beats, the square toe tapping the floor. On the couch, the newspaper rustled as Trisha's father turned a page.

"Can't you play something that doesn't have something with religion in it?" said Trisha's father. "Even when you aren't playing that classical stuff, why do you still have to have religion in it?"

Trisha swung around on the piano stool.

"That was nice, too, Tante," said Trisha.

"Really, honey?" said Tante. "You really mean that?"

"Of course," said Trisha.

Behind the newspaper her father made a noise.

"Well, you played good too, kid," said Tante, pleased. "A nice steady beat. Shall we play something else?"

"Minna," said Trisha's mother, coming in again from the kitchen, her apron still around her waist from doing the dishes. "Minna, how about you take a break for a while. You've been playing almost an hour now. Why don't have have something to eat? You hardly ate anything at dinner. I'll make you a ham sandwich if you want. Maybe some liverwurst?"

"No thanks," said Tante. "I'll eat when I 'm hungry."

And Trisha's mother's lips went thin as Tante turned a page and held her bow, high and straight now in the warm air.

It was night time. Trisha lay awake, staring at the ceiling. It was hot in the attic, much too hot to sleep. Softly, under the covers she sang to herself:

"When you wish upon a star,
Doesn't matter who you are."

How did that joke go that Tante always made about the Fifth Word, winking and laughing under her little black hat?

"I thirst, Ich durst--see how it rhymes with liverwurst."

What did liverwurst have to do with anything? There was another joke, too, about Jockey Shorts, but Tante never told it when Trisha's father was there. How old did a person have to be before they understood all of Tante's jokes?

Below in the living room below her parents were having their nightcaps.

"If only I could get her to stop drinking," said Trisha's mother. "Everything would be all right if only Minna would stop the drinking."

"For God's sake, Lena," said Trisha's father. "Don't upset yourself. You ought to know by now you can't do anything."

"But I have to try, Karl," said Trisha's mother. "I have to do something. Can't you see the way her clothes just hang on her?"

There was a noise of liquid being poured and then the clink of a bottle being set down on the formica.

"Try what?" said Trisha's father. "You've tried everything a human being can try. For God's sakes, Lena. Forget it. There's nothing more you can do."

"Maybe," said Trisha's mother. "But it hurts me that I can't do anything for Minna."

"Well, you can't," said Trisha's father. "You can't help a person who doesn't want to help themselves. That's all there is to it."

"When you wish--"

Then it would be quiet for a while, and then they would start up again.

Trisha's mother opened Trisha's closet and held out Trisha's new suit. It was purple and made of a patterned fabric that looked like fingerprint whorls.

"How about the new one? It looks very nice on you."

Trisha sat down on the edge of the bed. What day was it? Was it Thursday? She was pretty sure it was Thursday.

"Not that suit," said Trisha. "I want the black watch plaid skirt and a white blouse."

"Well, there aren't any clean white blouses."

The last time Trisha had worn the suit on a Thursday, Dorothy Grumbach had come over to her in the schoolyard. She was wearing her long hair in a French twist.

It was pulled back from the face, same as Trisha's braids or Trisha's mother's hair, but now Dorothy Grumbach was prettier than either of them.

Dorothy Grumbach was Terence's girlfriend now. She had been Terence's girlfriend for almost three months now. Trisha saw them walk in the same direction every day after school. In the schoolyard before class began, she had seen them holding hands. As for Peter, every day he walked home along a different street. In the morning he came late and stayed at the back of the line. When Trisha said hello to him, he just looked away.

"I wouldn't wear that suit on Thursday if I were you," Dorothy Grumbach had said.

"Why not?"

"Only fairies wear purple on Thursdays. That's how they recognize each other."

Trisha felt sick. She felt sick worse than that time after the polio shot when she had thrown up on the sidewalk.

Trisha's mother unbuttoned the jacket of the purple suit and frowned.

"For heaven's sakes," she said. "What's the matter with you? You loved this suit last month when I bought it for you."

"Tomorrow," said Trisha. "Not today."

Trisha's mother sighed. Then she said something that made Trisha happy in a way.

"You're just like Tante used to be when she was young," Trisha's mother said.

"Stubborn as a mule."

Tante's star was winking and blinking. Between the winks and blinks there was only darkness. Did stars die? Trisha looked through the index of her astronomy text until she found, "Stars. Red dwarf, collapsed." Then she shut the book and held it on her lap. Softly she sang to herself,

"When you wish upon a star

"Doesn't matter--"

But what should she wish?

Trisha's mother took Tante to all the way to Alexander's on the IND line to buy new clothes for Tante. Trisha didn't need to go, Trisha's mother said. It would take less time if the she and Tante went alone.

"See," said Trisha's mother proudly when they got back.

Tante held up a gray tailored suit with a matching handkerchief in the breast pocket. Trisha thought it was the ugliest suit she had ever seen.

"I don't know why you always have to buy things so severe, Min, but at least this time it fits," said Trisha's mother.

Then she turned to Trisha, smiling. "Right, Trisha? Doesn't Tante look better in size 6? The salesgirl said she's a perfect size 6 now."

"I just went along to humor your mother," said Tante. "I don't think I needed new clothes, really."

For once Trisha did not mind the gruffness.

Dorothy Grumbach and Terence had gotten engaged. They were going to be flying to Alabama next year, In Alabama you could be married at thirteen without your parents' consent, Terence had told Dorothy. In the schoolyard Dorothy Grumbach skipped rope and turned and twisted and never missed a step. skipped rope. And all the while not a whisp of hair fell down from her French Twist.

Next year they would all be going to junior high school. Dorothy Grumbach would be going to Hunter Junior High, which was all the way in the city. Hunter Junior High was a special school for academically gifted girls. Dorothy would go by train, changing at Times Square and then going uptown. Trisha's test scores were much better than Dorothy Grumbach's, but Trisha was too young to go into the city all alone every day. So Trisha's mother said--or , rather, so Trisha's mother said her father said. It was better all round for Trisha to go to Junior High School 43 and then to Longfellow High, Trisha's father thought. After all, Longfellow had been good enough for him, and for Trisha's mother, and even for Tante.

"Pattycake, Pattycake, baker's man--" shouted the crowd.

"Bake-me-a-cake-as-fast-as-you-can."

At the back of the schoolyard--Peter, his face blank, his hands in his pockets.

Higher and wilder, the rope. Louder and faster, the shrieks of the crowd.

"When you wish upon a star, doesn't matter who you are--"

Trisha sat down at the piano, turned a page, and began the Minute Waltz. At start the cadenza her thumb slipped.

Tante would have said, "So--writing your own cadenzas already, eh kiddo?"

"Karl."

Trisha's mother came in from the kitchen and untied the strings of her apron.

"Karl, we have to do something about Minna. She'll be in a hospital soon. I'm sure she's going to be in a hospital if we don 't do something ."

Trisha's father took another sip of his coffee. Slowly, he put his newspaper down.

Why did grown-ups like coffee? Why did they insist on drinking things that tasted bad?

"For God's sakes, Lena," said Trisha's father. "You can't help a person who won't help themselves. That's all there is to it."

Trisha's mother wiped her hands on the apron.

"Don't look at me like that," she said to Trisha. "It was ready for the laundry."

"Can I go do my homework now?" said Trisha. She pushed the stool back from the piano. "Can I please go do my homework?"

"There must be something," said Trisha's mother. "Maybe a priest from her church--"

"For God's sakes, Lena," said Trisha's father. "If she won't listen to you, what makes you think she would listen to a priest?"

"I don't know," said Trisha's mother. She sat down at the other end of the couch and put her head in her hands.

Trisha watched as her mother began to cry.

"Don't talk to me about priests," said Trisha's father. "For God's sakes, Lena. Stop crying. You'll just make yourself sick and then where will we all be?"

He put down the paper on the coffee table and went out of the room.

"Trisha," said Trisha's mother after a minute. "Your aunt isn't eating right. I've tried everything I can think to try and it doesn't do any good. How about you talk to her? Maybe she would listen to you."

On the piano, the yellow book was open to the Minute Waltz. Trisha went over to the piano and sat down. A feeling of despair came over her.

"Please," said Trisha's mother.

Trisha did not turn around.

"Please," said Trisha's mother.

"I said all right, didn't I?" said Trisha more loudly than she had intended. "What more do you want me to say?"

Trisha was in Tante's kitchen, smaller than Trisha's mother's but just as neat and not next door to the bathroom.

It was early Sunday afternoon, just after church. Tante was having a Dubonnet, which was really a Dubonnet and gin, and Trisha was having a Virgin Mary, which was a Bloody Mary without any vodka in it. Tante had a big silver cross around her neck. She was reading the program from her church. Her lips were still wet with the drink. As she read, they moved slightly. Under the silver whisps, her face was thin and pale. The silver leaf pin was nowhere to be seen.

"Look at this, kiddo," said Tante. "Here's my name in the list of those who gave to the new Sacristy. Of course, for what I gave them, they ought to put my name in the bulletin."

"Oh," said Trisha. "Did you give a lot?"

"I'll say," said Tante. "A lot for me anyway. A lot for the Executive Secretary of Liberty Life Insurance."

Tante took another sip and stared out into space. The stale scent of wine came across the table. Had Tante always looked so sallow? Her face was the same color as the front cover of the Chopin Waltzes, which Tante had bought for Trisha in the Schirmer Edition.

"Maybe you could come to Vespers some time," said Tante. "The music is very nice at Vespers."

"It's pretty late, Vespers, isn't it?" said Trisha. Why had she agreed to come? She was starting to feel sick again. "I don't think my mother would let me stay out that late."

Tante nodded.

"Well, it's not late but of course we'd have to ask your mother. I'm sorry, honey, I just wasn't thinking."

"I'm hungry," said Trisha. "Could we have something to eat?"

"Sure," said Tante. "I should have thought of that myself. How about some cheese and crackers before we go over to your mother's? I must have some somewhere."

Tante got up slowly and began to open cabinets. The veins stood out on her hands, thin and blue.

"I know I have some crackers here somewhere," Tante said vaguely. "Elizabeth Shea gave me some only last year."

Tante began to blink.

"I don't know where I got this awful cold," said Tante, mock-sniffing. "You watch out for it, honey. It really makes your eyes water."

Tante reached in a pocket and pulled out a small, crumpled handkerchief with lace edging and wiped first one eye, then the other.

Trisha got up slowly and began to walk toward the refrigerator. She was starting to feel sick again.

"Tante," said Trisha. "Why don't we have some cinnamon toast? Wouldn't that be nice, some cinnamon toast and tea?"

Her aunt put the handkerchief away and looked at Trisha. The expression in her eyes changed.

"Why cinnamon toast? What's with this tea? If I'm hungry, I'll say so, kiddo. You know?"

"I know, but wouldn't a little cinnamon toast be nice? Or maybe some tomato soup. How about some nice Campbell's tomato soup?"

Tante wrinkled up her nose.

"I think I'm old enough to know when I want to eat and when I don't," she said. "I'm a little sick on my stomach today, that's all."

"All the more reason to have some cinnamon toast," said Trisha, banging open the cabinet doors, one by one. She was starting to feel better. Surely even Tante would have to have a loaf of bread somewhere.

"Puh-leeze," said Tante. "Maybe later, OK?"

Trisha closed the cabinet and walked back to the table. There was a half-loaf of Wonder Bread in the cabinet, hard as a rock. Tante was reading the church bulletin with as much attention as if she was Trisha's father reading the newspaper.

"Tante," said Trisha softly.

Slowly and apprehensively her aunt looked up.

"We all want you to eat something," said Trisha. "We talk about it a lot. My mother would do anything if you would just eat. Even my father is worried about you. So please, please, pretty please with sugar on it, will you let me make you some cinnamon toast?"

Tante bit her lip and looked down.

"So that's it, is it? Even your father?"

Trisha nodded. Would her nose grow? Surely that had to be nonsense.

Tante turned the church bulletin over and then folded it in half, running a forefinger down the crease. She blinked faster and faster.

"OK, kid, OK, " she said in her soft voice. "Go ahead and make me some of your goddamn cinnamon toast."

Rosamunda Nunn was Tante's friend now. Rosamunda was a schoolteacher like Elizabeth Shea. She was soft and pretty and wore frilly white blouses with lace edgings. She lived in Brooklyn with her mother, who was even older than Elizabeth Shea's mother and spent her whole life in an armchair next to the cage of their parakeet. The parakeet was named Minty, which was short for Creme de Menthe.

Rosamunda owned hundreds and hundreds of books. She knew almost all of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" by heart, and many other poems besides. Trisha liked to look through Rosamunda's books when Rosamunda and Tante were out in the kitchen drinking and doing something they referred to as "talking church." Tante thought maybe there were some books Trisha shouldn't be allowed to read yet, but Rosamunda had a different view.

"Why shouldn't she read what she wants?" said Rosamunda. "After all, she's almost thirteen. In most cultures, she'd be grown-up by now."

Of all Rosamunda's books, Trisha liked the Lanny Budd books best. They had red bindings with gold lettering and were by a writer named Upton Sinclair. Lanny Budd was the illegitimate son of an American arms merchant and a French ballet dancer in the years just before World War I. He had a French mistress who was a married woman and was older than him besides and whose husband didn't care that she was Lanny Budd's mistress. Lanny Budd was interested in politics and art and everything.

"Do you know what illegitimate means, Trisha?" said Rosamunda. She had short brown hair that fell over her shoulders in curls, and was almost as pretty as Trisha's mother.

"Yes," said Trisha. "It means 'not normal.'"

Unlike Elizabeth Shea, Rosamunda was a good cook, and when Trisha and Tante would visit, Rosamunda's little apartment would be filled with the smells of roast pork loin and apple herb stuffing, mashed potatoes, sauerkraut, and real peas that had sugar in them. The parakeet would be allowed to fly about the living room, and old Mrs. Nunn would fall asleep with her hands in her lap. Tante and Rosamunda would go out in the kitchen and drink Rob Roys with the door closed and talk in low voices. In the living room Trisha would sit on the couch while Mrs. Nunn and the parakeet slept and read a Lanny Budd book. Rosamunda did not like Rubinstein but she did like opera, which she said was much better. Soon, Rosamunda promised, they would take Trisha to hear *Aida*. *Aida* had elephants.

Tante's face had lost the sallow coloring. She had given all the clothes Trisha's mother had bought her to the Good Will. Tante spoke to Rosamunda in the gruff voice most of the time, but as if it was a joke between them, one more thing to be winked at.

"Tante! Tante!" cried Trisha.

They were crossing the Triborough Bridge on the way to have dinner at Keene's Chop House. Tante said they would have filet mignon on toast points, and Vienna rolls, and butter pats on top of crushed ice. The sun was settling into the clouds of a gray winter night. After dinner, they would go to the Met. Renate Tebaldi was singing *Aida*, and Regina Crispin would sing *Amneris*. At intermission they would all go up to the bar and have champagne.

Tante put one arm over the back seat. She was wearing a silk scarf Rosamunda had given her. Tante was also wearing her new silver ring, heavy and with lines engraved on it. She looked warm and happy and annoyed at having been interrupted. Trisha felt glad for Tante and hurt all at the same time.

"Hey, kiddo," said Tante in her soft voice. "What's the matter? Everything OK back there?"

"Sure, Tante," said Trisha, settling back in the seat. She pulled her braids forward so they lay on the black velvet dress Tante had given her. In another moment the first stars would be coming out over Randall's Island. What were Dorothy Grumbach and Terence doing right now? Had they really flown to Alabama and gotten married? Or was Dorothy Grumbach with Peter now, the French twist unravelling under his soft Eastern European fingers?

In the front seat Rosamunda giggled.

"Are you sure everything's OK back there, kiddo?" said Tante again, turning around.

"Sure, Tante, everything's OK," said Trisha. She was trying out her new voice, which was loud and brassy like Tante's voice when she wanted Trisha to think she was cheerful. "Why shouldn't it be?"