EIRENE

Oswald humming as he fussed with his train, I dusting my doll house: that's how I remember those brief and interminable afternoons, each hour like an icicle melting in sunlight crazy with motes. We were little then but made littler to squeeze into the miniature world that filled both the living room and our imaginations, a Lilliputian haven of houses and trains. So long as we played with these toys the great world hardly existed for us, didn't need to, couldn't get in. How punctilious we were, Oswald's Lionel streamliner running on a strict schedule past my tidy Victorian mansion. You must know the way childhood memories draw themselves out like taffy, multiply themselves so that what may have lasted only weeks seems to have gone on for centuries. Escaping imposes the bittersweet duty to look back and I do, with compunction for Oswald and my mother who will never escape, and even for my father who did. But escaping isn't right; it feels wrong to slip out the door when what you really wish for is to set a long table and invite everybody in, to entertain them out of your own supplies until, sated and pacified at last, they exchange pledges and vows.

1.

Like a conductor hushing the crowd by spectacularly doing nothing, he waited for us to quiet down. "All right, people. People? Thank you. And thanks for showing up. It's good to see so many of you. Okay, let's begin. We'll get to the readings in a few minutes. First, I've got a short questionnaire I need you to fill in."

There were groans, companionable ones, from everybody but me.

Our director was a scruffy twenty-something with a voice probably higher than he'd have preferred and certainly shriller. He called us "people." Perhaps this was a theatrical convention, a neutral term, or maybe he thought it established him as our leader—chief of our little tribe. He wore a corduroy sport jacket, a painfully starched white Oxford shirt, and blue jeans—in my estimation, a costume calculated to suggest that he was both bohemian and keen on discipline.

Aristophanes' masterpiece is *Lysistrata*. We all had paperback copies of it in our laps.

"Call me Paul," he said to no one in particular as he moved briskly around the room, handing out his questionnaires. He might easily have had us pass them around but he appeared to like control, the personal touch. When he worked his way back to me I could see he was giving everybody a fixed, up-close glance, meant to be penetrating and

domineering. When he handed the questionnaire to me his face froze in an appraising frown and for an instant I felt like Medusa.

"NAME." I decided to write mine as the registrar did, in reverse. *Strahlend, Catherine*. I thought it would distinguish me; yet, on the page *Strahlend, Catherine* looked stiff, a bit regimental or first-day-of-school, so I added a nickname in brackets, *Cat*. This was an impromptu inspiration. I had never had a nickname—let alone one a cool as Cat. It flattered my feline aspirations: to move gracefully, keep my own counsel, to purr or scratch as circumstances required. Cat. I felt less nervous already.

Though I had my coterie of friends in the dorm I wasn't satisfied. Among the varied reasons I was trying out for this play the chief was to enjoy the camaraderie. People who pretend together, I figured, who slog toward a common artistic goal, surely must form a special bond. I didn't aspire so high as the lead; the Chorus would do for me. Still, this wish to be a joiner didn't prevent me from sitting off to the side of the classroom, or putting my feet up on the seat in front like a teenager at the movies. Why was this? Hauteur? Defense against rejection? I didn't know anybody there and wasn't sure how to behave. So I sat alone and gave myself a nickname.

Strahlend, Catherine was good, *Cat Strahlend* better, but *Strahlend, Catherine [Cat]* best. It was all new to me, the theater biz, but at least I'd read the play three times.

Next we were asked to rate our choices in order of preference: "ACTING…LIGHTING…MANAGEMENT…SCENERY/PROPS." Management? I looked around the room. None of these people was going to put management anything but last.

SING? (YES/NO), DANCE? (YES/NO). In for a penny, I thought, and circled YES, YES.

LIST YOUR EXPERIENCE IN REVERSE CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER. The director had left a lot of space for me to leave empty.

At the bottom: FEMALES: WILLING TO APPEAR ONSTAGE IN A BIKINI? (YES/NO).

I assumed all these eager drama queens would circle YES. I didn't dare say NO to anything, not with all that vacant space in the middle of the page.

2.

My father ran away from home when I was five and Oswald seven. It was another six years—my whole life again—before I nailed down for sure why he'd left, though by then it wasn't much of a mystery. Mother's official story was credible only so long as you believed in it, which I didn't do for long. Poor Oswald believes it to this day and, for all I know, his believing has convinced Mother to believe it too. Accepting a truth that those you love

refuse to acknowledge is isolating; it makes you responsible since you only have the choice to abet their delusion or smash it. In the end, I gave up; I yearned to move on.

It was early on a Sunday morning in April, after the last and most terrible of many nights, a night with two loud voices. Oswald woke Mother up. He wanted his breakfast. Mother looked funny; she came downstairs in her nightgown, which was unprecedented, and made us sit on the couch in the living room. The spring morning gushed through the big window and splashed over the Persian carpet. Oswald was trembling beside me and I took his hand.

Mother was grinning unnaturally, and her feet were bare. I couldn't take my eyes off those vulnerable unprotected feet. She broke into an embarrassed smile and when she was finally on the point of saying something she stopped, as if she too had just noticed her bare feet. "Oh, just a minute, darlings. Just wait here, will you?" She rushed upstairs. Mother was a careful dresser. She seemed to regard the occasion as one requiring that she be clothed and shod. Oswald and I were still in our pajamas. Mother knew that Oswald couldn't sit still for two minutes.

I took my big brother's hand. He stamped his feet; with his free hand he rubbed his eyes. "Where's *Daddy*?" he whined. "Where's *breakfast*?"

I moved my hand to his thigh and rubbed it. "Shush," I said.

"I'm *hungry*."

"Just wait," I said. "We'll eat soon."

In her best blue suit and matching pumps Mother came down the stairs; she'd put on powder and lipstick, too, and looked exactly the way she did when we went to Mor-Mor's funeral.

"Did somebody die, Mommy?" I asked.

Oswald began to wail.

"No, sweetheart, nobody's died," she said, sitting down in the armchair that faced the television, Daddy's chair. Oswald began whooping, gulping air. Mother crossed her legs impatiently. "Oswald," she said sharply. "Stop crying. Now."

Oswald didn't stop crying. I tried rubbing his back.

Mother uncrossed her legs and leaned toward us. "Now, I need you both to listen to me. All right? Daddy's had to go away." And then she told us The Story. Nowadays, I think she made it up on the spot, in the same way I extemporized my nickname. First, she explained

what an *orphan* was and how sad and terrible it was to be an *orphan*. Could we imagine how sad? And then she said our father had to go and take care of a whole house full of these poor orphans, because they had no fathers or mothers of their own and surely we could spare him just for a while, since we had *her* and *she* loved us more than anything in the whole wide world.

"*Hate* orphans," hissed Oswald, rubbing at his tears and bouncing furiously on the couch.

"Where's this house where all the orphans live?" I asked.

"Far away, I'm afraid, darling. *So* far away that Daddy may not be able to visit us, for a while. Maybe a long while."

"*How* far away?" I insisted.

"Oh, very, *very* far. In another *country*. On the other side of the *ocean*."

"The *ocean*?" screeched Oswald.

Oswald always had peculiarities, tics. Starting on that Sunday these grew worse, became more dominant, as if they were parasites that had moved into the place vacated by Father. He can't bear the feel of wool against his skin and the sight of even a hint of fat on a piece

of meat sends him rushing to the bathroom, heaving. Left shoe on before right, left trouser leg before right, buttons from bottom to top, never top to bottom. Can't stand any kind of hat on his head, fights having his nails cut. First the milk, then the corn flakes, then the sugar, and just the right amount or else.

My method for calming my brother's tantrums was this: the louder and jerkier he got the more calmly I spoke to him, eventually dialing down to a whisper, all the while rubbing his hand, his arm, his back. Mother could never manage it. The minute he started up she'd yell for me.

Two weeks after Daddy left to take care of the putative orphans a couple big boxes arrived. One was addressed to *Master Oswald Strahlend* and the other to *Miss Catherine Strahlend*. They were sitting plump in the middle of the living room when we got home from school, huge brown rectangles that took up nearly the whole floor. Oswald and I were beside ourselves with excitement.

Mother was preternaturally calm and spoke in a whisper as she handed me the scissors. "They must be from your father…. F. A. O. Schwartz," she hissed bitterly. "It's the most expensive toy store in the world."

So I got my doll house, Oswald his trains. Maybe children delight in small things not just because they themselves are small but because they're bigger than their doll houses and

electric trains. They can deploy homes, tracks, families, depots and towns just as they choose, little worlds over which they loom like caring parents, wrathful gods. Little boys adore the Tyrannosaurus because it's so huge and aggressive and can rip apart anything in its path. They equate size with power. Oswald relished lording it over little things, but his power was not of the stomping, masticating kind. He and I were both in harmony with our F. A. O. Schwartz toys and with each other because we wanted order, calm, regularity—and to be reminded of our father. Arranging my doll house, saving up for a tiny wooden table, making a bed out of a tobacco tin and a scrap of felt, setting the old lady with the bun of white hair on her rocking chair, drawing a little picture and gluing it to a wall, picking violets and dandelions to stuff into the tiny window boxes—these activities comforted me the way Oswald's rubbing his finger along the silky border of his blanket soothed him. Father's toys put us in a trance, dissolved time, gave us a temporary yet repeatable power at the center of our powerlessness. The difference was that Oswald never grew out of it, never dreamed, like me, of turning out rather than in or of seeking power in the wide world. I wanted to be bigger but I believe Oswald, if he could, would have chosen to be smaller, to take up residence in his perfect plastic microcosmos with its little farm and depot and silver milk cans. One day he gave a name to his little railroad town. He announced it was named "Pleasantville." What else? He was the Mussolini of his hamlet, for the trains always ran on time. He could declare it day or night, summer or winter. His will was at once arbitrary and precise; it could be Christmas one day, July Fourth the next. Everybody in Pleasantville, he assured me, was happy all the time—a whole populace that was visible

only to him. I asked him if my doll house was also in Pleasantville, since the tracks ran by it. Uncharacteristically, he answered at once.

"*Just* outside," he said with something like an apology.

Unlike other Lionel-loving boys my brother wanted no collisions, no speeding trains jumping tracks, and, when such accidents occurred, he blamed himself like a god surprised by the indeterminacy of his creation, a god with too much compassion. Like all utopias, our miniature worlds were serene, dull, and compensatory.

How can I describe Mother? *Hysterical* is politically regressive. *Highly-strung* is half a century out of date. *Fragile* might do, but it's rather open-ended. A sufferer from nerves, the vapors, megrims, intermittent instability, inclined toward sudden tears, self-pity, fits of suffocating sentimentality. You get the idea. Father's jumping ship wasn't exactly therapeutic. Aunt Teresa came for a short stay and that was a help to Mother, a relief. She just turned things over to her sister for a time. I liked Aunt Teresa because she was a ruthless organizer, like me, doing for our deranged household what I did for my doll house. She set things up, shook Mother back on her feet, worked out a budget, a schedule of chores and then, on the grounds that she had three children of her own and a needy husband, left. We adjusted, of course, which is what you call it when the abnormal becomes normal.

In those early days, fooling with my F. A. O. Schwartz doll house, I used sometimes to fantasize, almost always about my father returning from his exotic orphanage, itself a fantasy. After he came back, the youngest once again, I would be the apple of my family's six eyes. They would beam at me, take pride in my astonishing accomplishments—the platinum record, the Olympic medals. For my Sweet Sixteen, Father would take me on a grand tour of Europe. There would be no disappointments, no missed trains, never any recriminations, nothing but sweet concord clear across the Old World: a Henry James tour only with short, declarative sentences and a happy ending. While we were off enjoying the pleasures of Rome, Paris, Vienna, and London, Oswald would have become normal, even popular. While I was off with Father, he'd be with Mother up at our L. L. Bean summer house in Maine. In August, he'd invite a dozen of his friends to stay, all good-looking, courteous boys exactly two years older than me. What a jolly time they'd have, sunbathing, sailing, and playing lawn games, killing time waiting for my return. Then, on Labor Day, we'd all be united and there would be a huge clambake and a towering bonfire under a full moon. The boys would sing folk songs and motets and, like their singing, everything, including my mother and father, would resolve into one imperturbable harmony.

3.

High-school dalliances turn out to be real escapes only if they're also catastrophic, in which case they're anything but escapes. In fact, from what I observed, the girls who pinned their

hopes on boys pulsing with hormonal bravado only found fires to replace frying pans. They got aborted or had babies; became embittered or broken-hearted or annulled or sent away. In retrospect, I'd have preferred an all-girls school with plaid skirts, knee socks, and a high fence.

I found I was curious about boys. They were different from my brother and I wanted to know how different. I also wasn't above wanting to belong, even to be popular, at moments anyway. I enjoyed being clumsily flattered and contemplated with satisfaction becoming the subject of envious gossip. I approached and avoided, I avoided and was approached, anxious all the while that no boy should leave a scar or even make a dent. The moment one of them was less than kind to Oswald—who would have slavishly doted on them all had I permitted it—I sent them away. So, I was thought to be cool, verging on icy. This reputation suited me.

One boy told me I was the prettiest girl in school and for a few weeks I believed him. I was slim and looked taller than I was. It's a social asset not to be taller than most of the pool of boys. My eyes were large; my breasts were small, but my legs were good. My hair looked okay either up or down and I deployed it one way or the other depending on how I felt: *up* signified serious, intellectual, busy; *down* was supposed to mean glamorous, seductive, indifferent, and melancholy. I became the kind of girl other girls didn't like yet with whom they preferred to be on good terms. I was aware that boys liked how I looked, but I didn't

set much store by my appearance or obsess over it. Prettiness I thought of as an incidental advantage, like being good at algebra, only better.

So I had an easy time of it in high school, in so far as such a thing's possible. The alienation I felt was practically a choice. I led a double life: that of a pretty girl with good grades and that of my mother's shrink and housemaid, my brother's keeper and playmate. I may have been the youngest person in the house but I was the only adult.

Life at home was so demanding, the responsibility so onerous, that all the schoolhouse pairing-off sometimes seemed just frivolous. My relations with girls were more fraught than those with boys and provided more of my sentimental education. Starting in elementary school, I had a series of best friends. It was through these girls that I came to know myself. There was an episode, to give an instance, that proved to me that it wasn't only my duty but my nature to displace contention with harmony. Two friends fell out over a boy named Paul Belfiglio, a gorgeous lacrosse jock and classic two-timer. They stopped speaking to each other but had plenty to say to everybody else. The escalation could be measured by epithets: from *back-stabber* to *slut* to *bitch* and on down from there. And, mind you, these were *nice* girls. Meanwhile, Belfiglio continued seeing both, actually *using* their jealousy to work his way around the bases. "Why not? *Cheryl* let me." "Come on, Cheryl. Alana *loved* it when I did that." The jerk's conceit swelled up like a mandrill's butt. I knew all this because I was confidante to both Cheryl and Alana. Finally, like dust in my doll house or Oswald's untucked shirttails, I could stand it no more. I invited both for a

run through the park one Saturday morning. Cheryl turned up first. She was glad to see me until Alana showed up. They glared. I made a speech.

"Look," I said, "Paul's an asshole. Either of you is worth twenty of him. *Fifty*. He's obviously playing you against each other. God, he even *brags* about it. Did you know that? What do you think you're doing, murdering each other's reputations? I'm sick of it. You want my opinion, you should both dump him—bang! In fact, you should do it *together*. Then you should kiss and make up…and, and let him *see* you doing it. Okay? Think it over while we run. Come on. Five miles."

In the cause of peace and order I could be a bully. Like Lysistrata.

In high school I was liberated from the task of defending my brother which I'd done fiercely in middle school, actually earning some respect for it. But in ninth grade Oswald, after a short, unequal battle between Mother and the authorities, was assigned to a vocational school. I agreed with the experts. Oswald turned out to be pretty good with computers, not at writing code, of course, but repairing glitches, keeping a system up and running. It wasn't so different from the care with which he maintained Pleasantville and his railroad: good with things, bad with people. With girls, Oswald wouldn't even try. I once asked him if he'd like me to fix him up. "No!" he yowled in panic. I backed off, not a little relieved, and stayed backed off.

My own experience of high school was of a just-tolerable waiting-room, Purgatorio rather than Inferno. College I imagined as Paradiso. My dreams shuddered into life the moment I opened my father's letter with the enormous check in it, a check that was, as he said, "just for starters." He pledged himself to pay whatever the four years would cost, adding sweetly that it wouldn't break his heart if I could swing some serious financial aid. So I applied to four expensive schools, got into all of them, too.

I spent that summer at home working at Walgreen's and preparing Mother and Oswald for my coming defection. They were so dismayed at the prospect, both of them alternately clutching and resentful, that I came to relish my hours at the drug store as a paid respite. I loved my mother and brother and accused myself of treason for leaving them—above all, for *longing* to leave—but, *Life called*. I told myself they'd be all right, turning it into a financial calculation, as if that were the point. Mother was a part-time receptionist for two dentists, the same job she'd talked her way into a couple months after Father took off. She loved working there, thought of herself as indispensable to her dentists, calling herself "the pin in the pinwheel." I knew she also got checks from Father. To be fair, he never stinted on the price of freedom. As for Oswald, at the start of his third decade he astonished us by landing a job and then holding on to it. My brother was probably the world's only minimum-wage IT guy. On the recommendation of one of his teachers, he'd been taken on by a three-branch local bank that had just been snapped up by a much bigger one. The big bank wanted to upgrade and Oswald was a cheap frill, diligent to the point of zealotry, willing to work any hours they wanted; he'd have swept the floors too, if they asked. He'd

take the bus straight home to his Lionels and the veggie burgers he'd adopted as his staple diet. That summer he'd come though the door calling my name.

No ivory tower, no mere escape, College was to me the one place where reality was seriously thought about. So far as I could see the so-called real world ran on advertising and public relations, or tried its hardest to do so. Anyway, the point wasn't just to get to some other place or to have something I lacked but to *be* someplace and *become* something. I was the most eager of freshmen, one who'd feared that she might never get to be one. College loomed above me not as some post-adolescent warehouse; it was the possibility of liberation, the place where the books I loved were loved by others, the chance to actualize the finest word I learned in my first philosophy course, my *entelechy*. I was that kind of college student; I was the sort who can get excited even by Aristotle. My father may have absconded but he didn't abandon. He sent money which, in my circumstances, wasn't such a poor substitute for love—and maybe it wasn't a substitute at all. A doll house and then college…not such a bad deal. When the university president ended her welcoming address by saying "Let the adventure begin," I didn't laugh like the girl next to me; I murmured *amen*.

The Boyfriend. That's what I called him: first to myself, then my friends, finally to his face. *The Boyfriend*…the sobriquet exalted him, as if there were only one in the world, but also reduced him to a single function. *The Boyfriend*…a phrase that, it now seems to

me, denied the intimacy it seemed to proclaim. *The* Boyfriend and yet only The *Boyfriend*. It must have sounded as if I begrudged whatever affection I felt for him.

We met that first October in the hallway of my dorm. We both liked what we saw. He was dressed to take somebody to a party; I was coming out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel. The Boyfriend was handsome, well built, and moderately bright. He was a sophomore majoring in business and pretended he was taking me *under his wing*, *showing me the ropes*—he actually used these phrases. I suppose I was a mystery to him. According to a book I read, male sexuality is all mixed up with aggression; their urge to penetrate begins as curiosity; the biblical verb "to know" is ambiguous yet precise. Maybe the Boyfriend thought he could figure me out by getting into my pants. To be honest, The Boyfriend was pretty ordinary. Part of his charm, in fact, was to make me feel I was the one thing in his life that wasn't ordinary. To me, his normality was exotic, as my eccentricity probably was to him; it was the mutual fascination of the rabbit and the snake. For a time I hoped that being the Boyfriend's girlfriend would make me indistinguishable too. I put it to him, "I want to go unnoticed, but at the same time I want to be extraordinary."

After I went out for the play in February I told the Boyfriend that he could start calling me Cat.

4·

After we handed in our forms the director blitzed us through a set of readings, our auditions. He sat in the first row, called out our names from the forms, held up a sheet of paper. On each sheet he'd typed a speech from the play which we had to stand at the front of the classroom and deliver. He appeared to scrawl savage notes on each form before saying *Thankyounext*, but I couldn't see his face until it was my turn. An inscrutable countenance it was, cold as the stuff caked on the top of the freezer compartment.

ThankyounextCatherineStrahlend.

To me he assigned a bit of the heroine's ferociously level-headed speech explaining to the red-faced Commissioner how wool-working is the template for sound politics:

> First, you take raw fleece
> and you wash the beshittedness off it:
> just so you should first lay the city out
> on a washboard and beat out the rotters
> and pluck out the sharpers like burrs, and when
> you find tight knots of schemers and plotters
> who are out for key offices, card them loose,
> but best tear off their heads in addition.

I didn't feel I'd done at all well with the speech—hadn't been sufficiently furious or mocking—and yet when I got the call-back a week later I couldn't prevent myself from thinking I must be up for the lead.

Blind hopes, of course. It took the director a quarter of an hour to dole out the parts, to announce the identities of *his* Kalonike and Lampito, *his* Cinesias and Spartan herald, all the members of *his* two choruses and who'd lead each. Finally everybody in the room had a role but me, Ms. Humiliated. Must have been some error, I figured, that call-back. If only there'd been a door at the back I'd have made a dash for it.

"And last but *any*thing but least, my Harmony," said the director with a lascivious grin. "That'll be you…you…" With an excess of drama he glanced down at my form, "Catherine Strahlend. That's Cat, right? *Cat*?"

Meow. Craftier than I, none of the other females had agreed to appear next-to-nude for five minutes in the final episode. It wasn't modesty, I realized. It was because Harmony had no lines, because hers was the one role in the history of classic Western drama in which a young woman is *absolutely* objectified, transmogrified into an eroticized map. I felt I'd been kicked in the midriff. Ouf! And yet the instant he said *Cat* I knew I'd go through with it, wear that nano-bikini and the cheesy beauty-contest sash with *Harmony* spelled out on it—that I'd be just a piece sublimated into Peace.

I not only read Aristophanes' play five times but, with no lines to memorize, actually thought about it.

You know how it goes. By the end, the women's sex strike has worked so well that the horny warriors of Athens and Sparta are just dying to end the Peloponnesian War. They want to screw more than to kill; they're yearning to be husbands again, to get down and dirty: *I'd like to strip and get to plowing right away*. The Athenian's so befuddled by lust he doesn't even know he's punning, doesn't connect his drive to deposit his seed to how desperately ravaged Attica is in need of husbandmen. Harmony's brief scene, that virtuoso riff of double-entendres, epitomizes the entire play.

The women suffer too, of course, also feel deprived; in fact, sexual frustration is their chief motive for going on strike, giving up what they want to get more of it. Aristophanes is too smart a comedian to include any sentimental or lofty anti-war talk. The women want men and the men are off fighting and getting killed. The women only go to *war* with the men because they want to go to *bed* them; the men make peace only because they lust to have at it with the women. To Aristophanes as to Freud Eros is in the driver's seat. The play leaves you suspecting that the only reason Lysistrata prevails is because the women are able to hold out fifteen minutes longer than the men. Aristophanes is instructive; he shows us that the war between the sexes can be perpetual only because it has an infinite number of truces. Luckily.

On my last reading I had a thought that was almost deep: that the democrats who invented drama erected it on the most durable of foundations, that of biology: as death is to tragedy comedy is to sex.

So what is Harmony's role? It is to be the incarnation of comic Eros, all curves, plenty of skin, a dumb land ripe for a plow, the best alternative to the murderous phalanx.

So at the end Lysistrata presses the negotiations with the Big Tease. This is literally where I come in, viz. *A naked maid appears from inside*. Lysistrata directs me to conduct the tumid ambassadors to her in order that she can dictate terms. *If he won't give his hand, then lead him by the prick*.

The men can't tear their eyes off me—*What an unutterably lovely ass*—so that the diplomatic negotiations turn into ogling, a butchering of my body: *Now first suppose you cede to us that bristling tip of land, Echinos, behind which the gulf of Malia recedes, and those long walls, the legs on which Megara reaches to the sea*…. The scene's mercifully short, at least. My job's to absorb all that war-making testosterone and empire-building passion and make sure they think with their pricks. A dirty joke? The ultimate in Aristophanic daring? Mere wisdom? The play didn't end the Peloponnesian War, of course. In fact, the war got worse. Still, it's a play with a message nobody in the one-drachma seats could miss: make love, not war.

And what of the maid, what of Harmony? She's Aristophanes' theme made flesh, though just a topographical slut, a mere doll. She's nobody's girl and everybody's. Eirene's a doll without a house.

5.

The play was to go up in April and we rehearsed all through March. The campus enjoyed an early, perfect spring, daffodils and azaleas, quads like cricket pitches; but for me it was a time of troubles and changes. I carried on with my coursework as I used to play with my doll house, by excluding everything else. I could manage this for up to three hours at a time. I saw my friends, ate salads in the Food Court, sipped coffee as I walked to class, attended rehearsals, phoned home. You wouldn't guess anything was wrong.

What changes, what troubles? First, the Boyfriend. I broke up with him and wouldn't, couldn't tell him why. He was flummoxed, clueless. I simply raised my hand and pointed implacably to the door, bore a flaming sword and expelled him from my garden. At first he was almost teary but quickly became angry, which was much preferable, and accused me of freezing him out, said it was as if I'd hung up on him. Well, until he stopped calling, I did that too.

To my surprise, I told Professor Lieberman, my World Lit teacher, all about it. I didn't intend to but by then there wasn't much I didn't tell Professor Lieberman, of whose abundant office hours I took extravagant advantage.

"You look a little blue."

"I broke up with the Boyfriend."

"The Boyfriend?"

"That's what I call him—*called* him."

"I see. And you're what? Devastated? Relieved?"

"Yes and no."

He nodded. I sat in the chair he kept beside his desk. I liked that he didn't put his desk between himself and the students who came to see him.

He waited. He was good at that, in class too. He'd ask a leading question (*If Hamlet's father was king and he's dead then why isn't Hamlet king*?) and could tolerate the ensuing

silence longer than any teacher I'd ever come across so that, exasperated by his patience, somebody *had* to say something.

"We were in this store. The cashier was slow making change—you know, had trouble figuring it out. The Boyfriend turns to me and smirks. 'What a retard,' he says, just like that. *Retard*. That's what jerks used to call my brother."

Lieberman picked up his pen and fiddled with it. "Couldn't get by it, then?"

"No. That's just it. I couldn't. But, I mean, I've got to ask myself whether, if it weren't for my brother, if I'd have objected so much. On the other hand, I don't want to be the kind of person who's indifferent to casual abuse of the weak. Was I seeing the truth about the Boyfriend or misjudging him by a snapshot?"

"What do you think?"

"I think it doesn't matter because it's just as you say; I can't get past it. When I think of his voice it's all I hear. *Retard*."

Professor Lieberman looked wistfully out the window. "Like a thunderhead at the end of one of these nice spring days."

"Pardon me?"

"Blots everything out."

This simile somehow raised my spirits. Professor Lieberman could always make me feel better, even when I didn't need to. So I smiled at him.

"Well, I don't suppose you came to see me about…about the *Boyfriend*, did you?"

"Nope. I came about Aristotle, actually."

"Aristotle? He's not on our reading list, not even the *Poetics*."

"Actually, I wanted to ask you about something that happened in my Ethics class."

My special relationship with Professor Lieberman began on the first day of class when I reluctantly answered a question he asked.

Introduction to World Literature I. The sheer poundage of that title seemed to squash my aspiration to read everything. But instead of starting with ponderous words, he'd led off with a little exercise. He gave us each a copy of "The Lady of Shallott," told us to read it and write down three statements describing it. Then he asked some of us to read what

we'd written. I can recall the response of a smart aleck who, in an adenoidal tenor, read out of his notebook: "1) it rhymes and rhymes and rhymes and a lot of these rhymes are the same, 2) it's way too long, 3) 'The Lady of Shallott' is exactly the sort of poem people have in mind when they say they hate poetry." Professor Lieberman did his best to transmute this lead into pedagogical gold without denying that the lead was really lead, which I liked. Then he called on me. I connected the poem to *Idylls of the King*, commented on the Victorian enthusiasm for medievalism, and wound up by categorizing the poem as a literary ballad that was probably written in emulation of Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." This made me a much worse wise-ass than the poetry-phobe; nevertheless, Professor Lieberman beamed on me.

"Okay," I said. "My ethics professor lectured on Aristotle's idea of practical virtue, that Goldilocks, not-too-much, not-too-little idea—not a very inspiring notion of virtue, by the way. Well, anyway, it was an okay lecture; he gave clever examples and really nailed it down."

"And so?"

"Well, after he finished he asked if there were any questions—you know, the way teachers do when they don't really want any? But I had one. I asked why we shouldn't ever join the teenagers in the Camaros to the left or the blue-hairs in their Buicks to the right. That's not how I put it, of course. I wanted to know *why* Aristotle said that the proper course in

life lay between a vice of excess and one of deficiency. The professor looked at me as if I were an imbecile and gave me a condescending answer. 'Aristotle *said* it, young lady, because he thought it was *true*.' Oooh, *young lady*. The class laughed at me, of course, but I raised my hand again and this time he sighed and said 'What now?' I apologized and said I must have expressed myself poorly. 'What I wanted to know was *why* Aristotle thought it was true.' 'I've no idea what you mean,' he said and dismissed the class."

"A river without fish, a forest without trees, a school without questions."

"What?"

"Just an old saying. Did you feel humiliated?"

"Well, annoyed, I suppose. There's something the matter with that course. *You'd* never talk about playwrights or poets the way *he* talks about philosophers. You'd explain about *them*, not just what they wrote. You've taught me that poems are written by people who live particular lives at certain times, that the best works transcend their origins but they're still rooted in them. Right? So, there's no disembodied, spotless, a-historical, cerulean blue heaven where the writers sit around and write. But that's *exactly* the way he talks about philosophers."

"Quite a speech! So you've brought your annoyance to me instead of your philosophy professor."

I laughed. "I guess. Anyhow, what do you think? Am I missing something?"

"Well, here's what I think about Aristotle. I think he was born middle-aged, middle-class, middle-of-the-road. I think Aristotle's right about so much because Plato was so much more brilliantly wrong. I think a doctor's son from Butte, Montana isn't going to look at the world the same way a trust-fund kid from the Upper East Side does. I think Plato never got over knowing Socrates and that Aristotle never met anybody remotely like him. But then philosophy's not my field."

"I wish you *did* teach philosophy."

"And I wish you'd talk back to your philosophy professor the way you do to me."

"Touché," I giggled.

I loved that Professor Lieberman had a soft spot for me. I could see he found me smart—smart *and* pretty. It was a joy that his course ran for two semesters, that there was an Intro to World Lit II. In fact, I'd grown so fond of the man that I wondered if I might be turning him into a surrogate father. Everything that's trite isn't untrue.

Once, I impulsively asked why he taught a freshman survey course when—as I'd learned—most professors of his rank and reputation couldn't be caught sight of by an underclassman except with high-powered binoculars. "Wouldn't you rather spend time with English majors and your grad students? Isn't this, well, slumming?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Slumming? Look, Cat, let me put it this way. This is something to be kept just between you and me, please. You never know what freshmen might become while with graduate students I'm afraid it's only too clear. Anyway, I happen to like young people and think it a privilege to be around them. Maybe if I'd ever resolved the problems of adolescence I wouldn't feel that way."

"Well," I said, "we like you too—maybe because we sense that you like us back. I don't imagine that young people liked Aristotle very much."

"No, I doubt it. He's too much like a wise old uncle who's always right. Young people like Socrates. Aristotle's the anti-Socrates."

"And he's always *defining* everything to death and, besides, his science is so wrong."

"But he's nonetheless a real scientist."

"What do you mean?"

"Scientists are people who'll dump their prejudices as soon as they're pointed out to them. Give Aristotle a good modern physics textbook and another on biology and I'm sure he'd change his mind. I think he'd be grateful."

"Whereas people in the humanities…?"

Professor Lieberman laughed and got to his feet. "Time's up. Off to class."

At the door I had a wicked inspiration, an exhibitionist's impulse "One last thing, Professor. I'm going to be in the Drama Club's production of *Lysistrata* next month. If I get you a ticket, think you could come?"

Okay, no more Boyfriend. Not so bad, but April had much worse in store. One Monday night Mother phoned in hysterics (sorry, it's the only word) to say that my brother had been accused by a female teller of an improper assault.

"Improper assault? You mean *sexual*?"

"Yes," she blubbered. "They fired him, Catherine."

"Can I talk to him?"

"It's useless. He won't speak. He just plays with his trains."

I hesitated, heart beating wildly. "Police?"

"Thank God, no. But he's been *fired*."

6.

I couldn't get home until late Friday night. Just as Mother said, Oswald was completely shut down. I fell into bed. At ten the next morning Mother woke me to say said she was going to the mall with a friend; she needed a break, blessed me for giving it to her, and left.

Downstairs, Oswald was in his pajamas, as if he were still eight years old, already at his trains. I noticed how much Pleasantville had expanded, new houses, tiny pines, a bridge. I grabbed a cup of coffee and, when I came back into the living room, crouched on the floor near Oswald. He ignored me. I began to clean out my doll house, which was thick with dust. Best go easy, I thought, best take your time. I didn't ask him anything at first, only remarked on the changes in Pleasantville, admired his new boxcar. Nada, impregnable

zilch. After an hour of this I was fed up; I grabbed him by the shoulders and demanded to know what happened.

Oswald looked at the floor indifferently. "I was fired," he said tonelessly.

I got in his face. "No. What happened with that *teller*?"

He shrugged.

"Did you—did you *touch* her?"

Oswald shrugged off my inquisitor's embrace, plucked the streamliner off the tracks and threw it at the wall. It made a terrible noise and left a dent. I was scared and pulled away, but then I took my poor brother in my arms.

When Mother came home Oswald was napping. My doll house was dust-free and I had a chicken roasting in the oven, a real bourgeois dinner. I'd forgotten the agreeable if short-lived satisfaction of good housekeeping.

Mother asked where Oswald was then, after I'd explained he was asleep, began talking fast: "What do we do? Did you get anything out of him? At least they're not filing any charges. I was terrified that—"

I patted her back. "Calm down. Look, you'll keep him home for a while and then, next month, I'll be home and we'll find him another job."

She sniffed. "Around *here*?"

"We'll try."

She started to cry. This exasperated me and I asked a question calculated to make her stop. "Did you tell Father?"

"Tell your father? That's a laugh," she said and then, to prove it, actually forced a noise that was vaguely like a laugh.

"Mom, is there enough money?" I asked quietly.

She rubbed her eyes and nose with the back of her hand. "Yes. Just."

I was back at school on Monday. On Tuesday I wrote a ten-page paper on John Donne. Wednesday was dress rehearsal; we opened on Friday.

I didn't even get to pick out the bikini. We had a wardrobe mistress, forsooth, a Juicy Fruit-chewing, improbably coiffed sophomore named Danielle who invented names for colors (angry-barracuda teal, three-day-old saffron), could discourse at length on textures, and told me with unshakable certainty that she'd be starting out in fashion journalism before moving on to designing her own line of ready-to-wear designer clothing. Except in a nightmare, Danielle said, she wouldn't dream of appearing onstage in a bikini (*Look at these hips!)* but she relished the idea of putting one on me. "You're almost model-skinny," she said while measuring my chest. "Dynamite pee-wee boobs, Cat," she crowed, though they were, truth to tell, larger than hers.

"Doubt I'll be able to score a *flesh*-colored bikini, even online. Too bad, really. Hm…," she mused, "…we *could* go with paint-the-town pink or—I know—Commie-Manifesto red. That's it! I mean you're *so* consumptive-poet pale, it'll be irresistible, like blood on Ivory Soap."

So my costume, the little there was of it, was red and my sash was white with red letters and my skin—lots of it—was "mommy-dearest pearl." The director, who interested himself a bit too much in these details at the dress rehearsal—insisted on seeing me with my hair up and then he wanted it down again. He opted for down because, he said in his most masculine voice, "With it up you make me think of those ladies that parade around the ring between rounds."

I endured all this calmly, submitted to being an object for Paul, Danielle, the crew, for the Spartans and Athenians. As I learned from Epictetus, Stoicism is the noblest recourse of the unhappy slave.

On the Wednesday before opening night Professor Lieberman sent me an email. "Thanks for the ticket." I'd shoved it under his office door. I could hardly hand it to him after class, not with everybody watching; in fact, I shouldn't have given it to him at all. He went on professorially:

> Have you read Plato's *Symposium*? I ask because you're taking a philosophy course and, anyway, you seem to have read everything. I ask because the play is *Lysistrata* and so I was wondering if you know the speech Aristophanes makes at the drinking-party. I think you'll see the connection:
>
> > *Mankind, judging by their neglect of him, have never at all understood the power of Love. For if they had understood him, they would have built noble temples and altars in his honor; but this is not done, and most certainly ought to be done: since of all the gods he is the best friend of men, the helper and healer of the ills which are the great impediment to the happiness of the race.*

Whatever part you play, Cat, I'm sure you'll do a fine job. Break a leg.

Prof L

Backstage in Rheinach Hall is a long corridor with four exiguous rooms off it. A few minutes before the play started I took refuge in one of these rooms, away from the hubbub and flirting. I had a white terrycloth robe around me—"Baskin-Robbins vanilla," according to Danielle—and half-listened to the excited bustle in the hallway. The director and stage manager were behaving like a panic-stricken shepherd and his dog, whispering their commands in stentorian whispers. It was functional chaos.

At the end of the corridor was a wide door that opened on to a concrete loading platform. During the big teasing scene between Cinesias and Myrrhina, I put on my sneakers and slipped out into the spring night.

Oswald, Mother, Father, the Boyfriend, Professor Lieberman—my mind ran on them. Eros the helper and healer. I reviewed with detached amusement the director's decrees. "Remember, Cat, you're a wind-up doll," he said, "so, eyes wide open, *really* dumb smile, please. You take the guys by their hands, very gently, and move them center-stage. Then I want you to stand still on your mark, full-frontal. *Absolutely* still. A *statue*. Got it?"

Should I ignore his orders? Should I rebel and grip the men by their biceps, covering up their strength, yank them across the stage, shove them up against one another? Could I really just stand still, like some life-sized kewpie doll?

It was still warm and not yet fully dark. The air was sweet with the smell of dirt and flowers. I could see the quarter moon and what must have been the evening star—Venus which, like me, isn't really a star.

Yank. Shove. Help. Heal. I didn't want to stand still. I wanted to dance around them all, Spartans and Athenians, oblivious to lustful eyes, greedy words. I wanted to glide in my nakedness through choruses of crones and geezers, following the measures of a peaceful sarabande only I could hear.