

[published in *Five Points* in an earlier version]

***The Man Who Knew Too Much and The Girl Who Knew Too Little*
by Sharon Dolin**

*Say nothing of what
you found or you will
never see your child again.*

—Kidnappers' note

Her bobbed blonde head in profile, Jill Lawrence reads the note her husband has just handed her. Only a few minutes before, at their hotel in the Swiss Alps, she had been dancing with their French friend Louis the champion skier when the sniper shot him in the chest. Before expiring, he slips her his room key and tells her to send her husband Bob to take his shaving brush to the British Consul. "Don't breathe . . . Don't breathe a word to anyone," Louis whispers.

I am watching Hitchcock's first version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934). It opens with an adolescent girl at its center, wreaking havoc. First Betty (Nova Pilbeam) runs out on the ski course after her dachshund while Louis is doing a ski jump, so he must veer away, tumbling into the crowd, to avoid crashing into her. Then she distracts her mother Jill so she loses a clay bird shooting match.

"Trouble," is what her father calls her. "A little wretch," says her mother affectionately.

Bob retrieves the secret message rolled inside the handle of Louis's shaving brush, and demands to speak to the British Consul. That is when he is handed this threatening note about his child Betty, the troublemaker.

After his wife Jill reads the note, nearly a half-minute of exquisite silence follows. She turns her face toward the ceiling, her eyes rolling upward with a look of numbed shock, before she slowly veers her head to the side.

Cut to a silent, blurry, dizzying pan around the room that captures her failing vision.

Cut to an objective shot that shows her full body collapsing in a faint on the floor of the local inspector's office with a thump that ends these long seconds of silence. She has just understood that their daughter Betty has been kidnapped.

Cut to a close-up of the animal-faced skier on the tiny brooch pinned to the lapel of the girl (her mother's gift to her that afternoon), with the furious insistence of sleigh bells in the background.

Pan out to a large gloved hand slowly lifting to unmuzzle the girl's open mouth, as she gasps for air in a state of silent terror. The bells of the horse-drawn sleigh Betty and her kidnapper are riding inside continue their incessant jangling, as she is being whisked away into the snowy mountains of St. Moritz. Kidnapped.

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My mother was my kidnapper. Not a stranger. But when she turned strange. When she went "off." Broke down. And a frenzied woman came to inhabit her body. When one of her paranoid episodes erupted, I was often the one she wanted to run away with. I was her baby, and no one was going to take me away from her. Not the police. Not the psych wardens. Especially not my father who always initiated the process of her hospitalization.

Summertime in the Catskills with my family at one of the Borsht Belt hotels, I think it must have been The Pines. One of the few times my grandparents on my mother's side have paid for us to come visit them for a few days. I am quite young, no more than four or five, in the day camp arts-and-crafts hut alone. How can this have happened? I am looping a potholder onto its frame, so intent on weaving together the red, blue, and yellow bands that I do not notice at first when my mother comes in to retrieve me.

Instead of taking me back to the hotel, where my father and sister are waiting to meet us, Mommy pulls me by the hand and we begin to run into the woods at the back of the hotel property, past the occasional suburban house. Farther and farther we fly. *Where is she taking me?*

It may sound strange to write about my mother kidnapping me, but that is what it felt like.

I can summon up only these few rushes: My hands busily looping the colored bands over the skinny teeth that edged the metal loom. My mother's swirling, short peach coat. Running through the woods with her. A flurry of trees overhead as we flee. A feeling of panic inside.

How long were we gone? How far had we gotten before my father found us and rescued me from my mother? Somehow, we did not get lost in the woods forever. We were probably missing for no more than an hour.

Remembering early incidents like this one makes me wonder if that is why I sometimes feel so lost and anxious inside my life. Like I am running away with myself. Or that my feelings are. But somewhere inside me, I always find my father to bring myself back home.

No matter, all through my childhood, my father was in and out of work as a travelling salesman, childlike in his hobbies (he flew kites into his early eighties and collected geodes), and was often away on the road for a month at a time. My father was the one I counted on to protect me. He was all I had.

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In *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Betty's captors have been plotting to kill a foreign diplomat. They allow the girl a brief reunion with her father before they plan on killing them both. When Betty is led into the room and first sees her dad, she cries out "Daddy!" and dashes over to him, burying her face in his chest to bawl inconsolably for several long moments. Finally she asks where her Mummy is. At the Albert Hall. There, in the lobby before the performance, the hired assassin surreptitiously hands Jill her daughter's small brooch as a silent warning. Jill knows she should keep quiet if she wants to see her daughter alive. Loyal British subject that she is, once she figures out the location of the marksman and his intent, she cannot help herself from standing up and screaming, a split second before the marksman shoots during the clash of the cymbals, thus throwing off his shot.

In the final, protracted shoot-out between the police and the assassins, Betty is in the most danger, freed by her father from the locked room and then lifted up by him to flee over the rooftops before he is shot in the wrist. Seconds later, the marksman inches toward Betty who is as terrified as a cornered animal. Down below, Betty's mother Jill, the sharpshooter, spies her on the rooftop and she dares to take the shot to kill the marksman, a shot that the policeman "daren't," because it "might hit the kiddie."

I watch as Betty, traumatized, sobbing in her striped pajamas, is being lowered by the police through the roof's escape hatch into the arms of her heroic mom and wounded father.

The girl's sobbing. Her ordeal. That's what grips me.

Did I sob when my daddy finally rescued me?

*

*I was sure God had marked my baby by making her pitifully "different" and I know why, so I didn't dare let anyone on our tiny island even see her. For over a year no one knew she was there in our home until that terrible day I had to reveal my shameful secret or perish with her on the island where **I Hid My Baby**.—*Intimate Story*, November, 1959*

This is the teaser for "I Hid My Baby," a sexually lurid tale in a trashy, modern romance magazine I imagine housewives flipped through, whiling away their afternoons at the hairdresser. Most of the stories are about illicit sex and its accompanying shame. "Too Hungry for Love" and "Picket-Line Pickup" bookend this story.

A full-page black-and-white photograph accompanies the tale. A handsome, dark-haired young couple and their blonde-haired child are caught in a storm. The brunette, with windswept hair and bangs, half-clings to, half-hides, behind her man while he looks up at the sky.

A pixie blonde girl of three in profile is in the young man's arms. He is holding her clumsily so the folds of her plaid dress are crumpled and pushed up around her legs. They are in a hurry.

The girl is crying and scared and very unhappy. What is happening to her?

I know she is scared because I am the girl in the photograph.

"Some man came up to us on the Beach [Jones Beach] and asked, 'Is that your little girl?' Then he handed me a card and asked me to call him up. So I did. And that's how you started modeling. But you didn't seem to like it very much, the modeling, so I stopped it after a few months," my mother explained when I find the copy of the magazine years later in her bottom dresser drawer and ask her about it.

My mother was right. I hated modeling. She had not bothered to tell me what was going to happen to me. Or at least I have no memory of her or anyone else telling me. And what would I have understood at such a young age? Things were just done to me, without warning or explanation. My mother picked me up and whisked me places without telling me where we were going. This was true of so much of my early childhood, even when my mother was well.

Early on, I must have had trouble telling when my mother was fine and when she was beginning to have, what we called, a *nervous breakdown*. As though my mother were a car that was being taken away for repairs. When could I trust her and when could I not? When I was very young, I do not think I always knew the difference.

At some point I learned to pick up on the smallest cues: her trembling hand, her glittering eye, a mania in her voice and movements. This was how I survived.

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I'm standing beside a Lassie dog and some strangers—big men in jumpsuits—are throwing water at me and there are big bright lights on me and I'm screaming. Why are they doing this? Why am I standing here soaking wet with this Lassie dog? I want my Mommy!

I have a visceral memory of having modeled for this photo shoot. I feel myself standing there with the dog. Feel the bright lights and the shocking splash of water from a pail. Again and again. I am crying and crying. Everything feels so strange. Except for the familiar feeling of being lost and scared.

I have never been able to read through the entire story of "I Hid My Baby" (it's so tawdry and formulaic) until recently. The narrator has to hide her baby because she is illegitimate and "different." How is she different? The woman's shame has marked the child as "Mongolian," the term used then for a child with Down's Syndrome. "She was a child of sin, and anyone who looked at her would know." As though the woman's illicit affair caused the baby's difference.

I imagine the vicarious pleasure its prurient readers derived from reading of another woman's sexual escapades. A crass, titillating story, not unlike those in *True Confessions*, a magazine my friends and I would sneak a peak at when I was twelve.

What strikes me now about the photograph is how unforced my expression looks. I am traumatized. Not acting at all. Crying into the turned-up white collar of my dress. *Who are these people? Why am I with them? What are they gonna do to me? Are they going to run away with me?*

It could be a roughened-up version of a scene from my own young life. There is a stormy wind, probably manufactured in the studio with the help of some large standing fans. Some strange man has hurriedly grabbed a hold of me, hoisted me up and locked me in his arms so my plaid dress is mussed up and hiked up around my still-babyish legs. I want to get down and away. *What's going on?* The swirl of fright and sheer unhappiness must have surfaced with all its attendant terror.

Is my mother in the room watching as they do the photo shoot? Or does she have to wait outside?

I always thought I started modeling at age five. When I check the date on the magazine, 1959, I realize I was no more than three, just barely out of toddlerhood, when my brief career as a model made its stark entrance into my life, erupting, like the studio's storm. Or like my mother's paranoid abductions of me.

*

I enter a dance studio with Mommy. I am no older than five. I am crying even as we enter. Mommy leads me over to a lady. *Is she gonna give me away to this stranger?* I cry and cry, that is all I know how to do. Until the lady reaches into a drawer in a dressing table and pulls out a red lollipop, which she hands me. Then Mommy takes me home.

In this way I learn that crying, long and hard and without pause, can get me somewhere. Or at least take me home. That the only power I have as a child is through my tears.

*

My sister Marla, who is five years older than me, used to taunt me for being a crybaby. I never saw her cry. When I was young, we sometimes took showers together and she liked to lift me in the air. I was so skinny, it was easy for her to do. One time, when I was about six, and she had hoisted me up, just to see how high she could raise me, I slipped out of her arms (or did she drop me on purpose?) and I fell down, cutting open my chin on the bathtub rim. As the blood ran from my chin, I ran out of the shower, crying, "Mommy. . . Mommy!" I can touch my chin now and still feel the scar.

Once, just once, can't I make her cry? I wondered.

I collected rocks that I found on the street and cracked them open on the sidewalk with a hammer to discover if there were any gems, any crystals that sparkled inside. I kept my

rock collection in a large rectangular tin box that shut with a metal clasp. On its lid I had written "Sharon's Rock Collection" and I stored it in the basement closet on one of the dank shelves where we kept all of our board games. On summer afternoons, I took the box outside with a hammer, and crouched on the sidewalk with a dozen dull grey and brown rocks I had scavenged from the neighborhood. I raised the hammer and struck it down hard on the center of each rock, sometimes several times, careful not to hit one of the fingers on my left hand holding the rock in place. I cracked them open, one by one.

I was looking for some mystery. Some treasure. Some radiant shine. Something I could discover and collect. Even in Brooklyn, where the traffic whined by on Kings Highway, where we lived until I was ten, and few trees grew, aside from the rose of Sharon that opened its large lavender blooms each summer in our small concrete yard, at the back fence separating our house from our neighbor's, where another Sharon, my friend Ruby's big sister, lived.

Sometimes I found what I was searching for: milky-white crystals gleaming inside. Veins of pink or blue. I loved the contrast between their dull exterior and the interior glitter I longed to discover and keep as my own. They were the secret gifts of the neighborhood, overlooked by everyone but me.

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The summer I turn nine and my sister Marla is thirteen, she comes outside to see what I am doing. "Are you still cracking open rocks?" I stand up, still holding the hammer. "Yeah. It's for my rock collection."

She starts to laugh, I swing the hammer back and belt her in the stomach. Hard. She bends over screaming. I see tears spilling down her face before she goes running into the house to tell Mom. I stand there, gloating. For once, I have made *her* cry.

I know I have done something awful, and when my dad gets home from work that evening, my mom tells him. He turns around and with his booming voice says, "No TV! No TV for you tonight and fuh the rest of the week!" I begin crying, wailing. I have the stamina to go on for hours. In the past, my crying would make my dad give in.

"If you don't stop crying, I'm going to pick up this phone and have you taken away!" I watch him walk over to the phone, pick up the receiver, and begin dialing. I blanch and quiet myself down. *Is he serious?* In my household, this is a real threat, one that has been acted on many times before.

Am I going to be taken away, just like Mom? He puts the receiver back in its place.

*

This threat hung over me through my teens and into my early twenties. If I cried too much, someone might pick up the phone and have me taken away.

Was I destined to become like my mother? Would I need to be hospitalized? My dad planted that fear inside me. After that incident, it was as though every time I cried, the

tears themselves watered that fear and made it grow. Would I cross over some invisible line this time and become like her?

Sometimes I used to visualize my shifting emotional states as if I were running toward a cliff, as in a cartoon. If I cried too much, if I became too depressed, then I would edge out onto and over that cliff. Unlike Bugs Bunny or Road Runner, I feared I would fall down, down, down into the hellish whirlpool of madness that rose up periodically and swallowed up my mother.

*

The British psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott, coined the phrase “the good enough mother,” one now in common parlance. *The good-enough mother . . . starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant’s needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant’s growing ability to deal with her failure.* He also talks about the importance of the “holding environment” of the mother, where the infant transitions to further autonomy.

I have photograph after photograph of my mother holding me as an infant in her arms and then as a toddler sitting in her lap. I look safe and bonded to her.

Was my mother good enough? I knew she loved me, yet I fantasized I might have a different mother. I loved my Aunt Fran, my mom’s younger sister, who was talkative, loud, and flamboyant. She played Mah Jong with her friends just like my friends’ moms did. Maybe she could become my mom.

*

As a child, when I first watched on television Doris Day playing Jo McKenna in Hitchcock’s American Technicolor remake of *The Man Who Knew too Much* (1956), she struck me as the ideal mother. Beautiful and vivacious, she is suspicious where it makes sense to be, recognizing that the man Louis Bernard, whom the family has just met on the bus on their way to their hotel in Marrakech, has asked lots of prying questions, particularly of her husband, while revealing almost nothing about himself. “You don’t know anything about this man and he knows everything there is to know about you,” Jo tells her ingenuous, Midwestern, doctor husband Ben (James Stewart).

Jo is suspicious—some might say paranoid—with good reason. Upon entering their hotel, when they pass the British couple (who will kidnap their son the next day), she catches and registers the sinister gaze of the woman. “We’re being watched,” she tells her incredulous husband.

That evening, Jo is stunning in her white chiffon A-line dress covered in delicate, flowery green sprays. Each time I watch, I catch my breath at her glamour—a mom no less—who sings “Whatever Will Be Will Be” in duet with her son Hank, a boy of ten, as she waltzes him off to bed.

That evening, at the traditional Moroccan restaurant, Jo tells her husband Ben, “Those people are staring at us. . . . right in back of us.” “Jo, will you please stop imagining things.” Ben is exasperated with her.

Imagine a mother who is paranoid because there *is* something to be paranoid about. Like the Sixties slogan, “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t out to get you.” At this exact moment, the same British couple, Lucy Drayton and her husband Edward, introduce themselves to the McKennas. “You *are* Jo Conway, *The Jo Conway*.” Ben corrects them, “We’re Doctor and Mrs. McKenna.” Jo, a singing star, has given up an international career as a soloist (as well as her surname) to become a doctor’s wife in Indianapolis—not an unusual thing for a woman to do in the Fifties.

Later on in the movie, when Jo and Ben have gone to London in search of their kidnapped son, Jo’s friends from her days as a singing star burst into their hotel room and, in a lovely feminist twist, assume Jo’s husband must be Mr. Conway, having taken on Jo’s surname and not vice-versa.

This good-enough mother entrusts her little boy Hank with a nearly perfect stranger, Mrs. Drayton, whom she has dined with only the night before at the Moroccan restaurant. How easily she allows herself to be influenced by her husband and to forget her initial suspicion of the couple (which was the right response to have, as it turns out, to trust nobody), and drops her guard.

The next day, the Frenchman Louis Bernard, unrecognizable in Moroccan garb and with a darkened face, is pursued by a Moroccan man and the police in the outdoor market until the Moroccan catches up to him and fatally stabs him in the back. As Louis Bernard stumbles forward, he chooses to reveal his identity to Jo’s husband Ben and to whisper to him his dying words. In this moment of crisis, Jo lets down her guard.

“You don’t want your little boy to go, do you?” asks Mrs. Drayton, clasping Ben firmly in her right hand. “I think it’s better if I take him back to the hotel, don’t you?” And when Jo agrees, “Would you please?” Mrs. Drayton hands Jo her large sun hat in exchange for the boy, while Jo and Ben head to the Marrakech police station for questioning. The Draytons, we will learn, end up kidnapping Hank, flying out of the country with him on a private plane to London, where he will be held hostage to keep his father from telling the Moroccan police or Scotland Yard what he knew too much of, Louis Bernard’s dying words: A foreign statesman is to be assassinated and Ambrose Chappell (Chapel) is the clue.

Unlike the earlier black-and-white version, in this American version, we never *see* the boy Hank as he is being kidnapped. No terror-stricken face. No crying out or smothered cries. No look of shocked terror. After Mrs. Drayton calmly takes Ben away in the outdoor market, we next see him calmly playing checkers in a back room inside Ambrose Chapel in London with a bored, somewhat nasty underling of the Draytons. The

kidnapped boy looks somewhat bored too, not scared—something I never quite understand, even upon repeated viewings.

I watched this later version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* on television with my parents, as I lay on their bed, sprawled on my stomach, leaning on my elbows, while they leaned back against their mahogany headboard. I identified with the boy Hank and felt scared for him. How frightening to be stolen away from one's parents.

I never thought about it consciously, that in my own life, either parent could be separated from me: My dad could go away on a month-long sales trip or my mom could be taken away to the hospital. Or, what was still worse—and surely I must have tried to think about it as little as possible—my own mother, during one of her paranoid episodes, could force me to run away with her.

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As I watch this movie yet again, I linger over a scene I never paid much attention to before. Ben and Jo return to the hotel room after the Marrakech police have finished questioning them. Ben already knows the Draytons have kidnapped and fled with their son Hank. He has read the note but he has withheld this information from Jo. He pulls rank as a doctor and gets Jo to swallow a sedative. "I make my living knowing when and how to administer medicine. . . . Now Jo, you know what happens when you get excited and nervous. . . . Now you've been excited, you've been talking a blue streak, you've been walking around in circles." She has been doing none of these things, but he insists she take the tranquilizers by tantalizing her with the withheld information about Louis Bernard's murder. After she gulps down the pills with some water he tells her everything, including that the Draytons have kidnapped their son.

Before the sedative has taken effect, Jo has the kind of reaction any mother would have if she discovered that her child had been kidnapped. She becomes enraged and nearly violent with grief, partly because she realizes Ben had deliberately withheld this information from her. "How *dare* you! You gave me sedatives!" she bawls, as she struggles with him, punching his arms, as he grips her upper arms tightly.

Ben physically restrains her, compels her to sit on the bed, and forces her to lie down as he pins back her arms, all the while soothing her and apologizing as she continues to sob, until the powerful sedative knocks her out.

It is the hardest scene for me to watch: as Ben strong-arms Jo into taking the sedatives so she will "feel better," and then uses bodily force to restrain her. Maybe it triggers scenes I never saw—or have forgotten I saw, even repressed—but can imagine must have happened to my mother.

How many times did doctors take my mother away against her will? Did I see her struggling with the police or ambulance attendants in the house or on the street? How many times did they do things to her for her own good? Give her medication, strap her down, administer electroshock treatment, what is now called ECT: Electroconvulsive

Therapy. "Therapy." A word that still makes me wince. Did my mother ever have a say in any of it?

Of course my mother's paranoid, schizophrenic episodes were much more serious than Jo's tearful outburst, but neither of these two women had a choice. Men, doctors mostly, made decisions for them for their own good. Did my mother *feel better* after they gave her electroshock? I know she was terrified of being hospitalized because of it.

Did my mother feel better after psychiatrists prescribed so many pills for her that she went through life as a sleepwalker? Once she was on so many pills, I could never tell what she was feeling, or how much she felt at all. Which may have been the doctors' goal: to stop my mother from feeling. To contain her at any cost.

*

"You wanna do drugs?" my dad asked me and my sister while we were both teenagers. He flung open the hall closet, whose door held racks and racks of my mom's prescription pill bottles. "Here! We got lotsa pills. Right here."

Is he serious? I shrunk away in shock. *Who wants to turn into a zombie?* I wondered, as I discovered more and more teens in my high school were taking Quaaludes, a strong sedative. *Who wants to be like my mom?*

*

My first year at South Shore High School, in the 10th grade, I work in the Program Office along with my friends. We have special hall passes that give us the privilege of running around the school building whenever we want. "What are you on?" students who hardly know me stop to ask, as I go racing by in the hallway, too high for it to be natural. This is 1970, when many teenagers are on something. "Raisins!" I hold up my daily snack of Sun-Maid raisins in a bright red box with a picture on it that looks a bit psychedelic: a smiling girl in a bright-red bonnet holds a cornucopia of green grapes, with a huge, atomic sunburst behind her. They stare at me, a bit stunned, as I shake the box and continue to fly by.

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Knowing too much and knowing too little. As with so many Hitchcock movies, the plot turns on knowledge, often known too late. In London, where the couple knows the Draytons have taken their son Hank, Ben goes off on a "wild goose chase," as he calls it afterwards, in an instance of Hitchcockian drollery, to find Ambrose Chappell, who turns out to be a taxidermist. There he ends up in a physical struggle, after his own hysterical outburst, to get out of there, with half-stuffed wild cats all around him. He even gets his hand trapped between the fangs of a taxidermied, roaring tiger.

Meanwhile, Jo, the smart, beautiful, talented, blonde mom, ends up figuring out the mystery of Ambrose Chapel: "It's not a man; it's a place!" And it's not the man (the doctor), it's the woman (the wife and mom and former stage singer) who deciphers all the clues and rushes to Albert Hall where she figures out who the assassin is and then anticipates his actions to prevent an assassination.

Jo is an emotional woman, moved to tears by the internal struggle of wanting to protect her son yet not being able to stand by when she sees an assassination attempt is going to be made on the prime minister's life. Right before the cymbals crash, she cannot help herself from screaming, which throws off the sharpshooter's aim, which saves the prime minister's life.

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Knowing too much and knowing too little. I remember so little about the kidnapping episodes of my childhood, as though I needed to forget them once I had survived them. One episode stands out, but even those details need filling in and I know, as I write this version, the details I select will solidify in my memory, as though I remember it more vividly than I do.

You adulterate the truth as you write. There isn't any pretense that you try to arrive at the literal truth. And the only consolation when you confess to this flaw is that you are seeking to arrive at poetic truth, which can be reached only through fabrication, imagination, stylization.—W.G. Sebald

My sister Marla has taken me to see *A Thousand Clowns* (1965) at a local movie theater, most likely the Marine Theater on Flatbush Avenue or The Brook Theater, around the corner on Flatlands Avenue, the two movie theaters we frequent after getting a slice of pizza and a soda for lunch. I am eight or nine: a very skinny girl with dirty-blond hair and bangs. Let us say on this day I am wearing a candy-striped blouse over powder-blue shorts. My sister Marla is around fourteen, on the cusp of puberty: with reddish brown hair parted on the side and a light sprinkling of freckles on her face. Let us say she is wearing a paisley button-down shirt over culottes. I cling to her and go places with her whenever she will let me.

We are in the middle of watching the movie when my mother enters the darkened theater and comes up and leans over to speak to us from the aisle. "Come on. We have to go," she tells us in a loud whisper. My sister and I both hesitate. *What is she doing following us into the movies?* "Don't you wanna see where I'm working?"

I have no memory of my mother holding down a job. Under pressure from my dad, she would find a clerical job for no more than a week or two, then collapse under the strain of it and have to quit. Perhaps this is one of those rare weeks.

Maybe there is something manic in her voice. Or maybe it is her peculiar behavior, coming after us in a movie theater. My sister and I both sense something is off, but really, what can we do? Say no? She is our mom, after all. We nod our heads and creep out of the theater along with her.

We have our Chrysler convertible then, a big, pale-green car with a white top, with stainless steel, gleaming trim and white-walled tires. My dad bought it secondhand, and we all love it. It is our favorite car, of all the used cars he buys over the years. It must be summertime because Mom has the car's top down.

What does Mom look like this afternoon? Here is a plausible look, helped along by photographs from around that time: She is wearing one of her sleeveless, loud, flowered tent dresses with a two-stranded choker of iridescent, white glass beads at her neck. She is already beginning to get plump. She has just had her hair done at the beauty parlor, so it swoops up, away from her broad forehead into a raised confection over her head, a bouffant made popular by Lady Bird Johnson. The hairdo always reminds me of the spun cotton candy I get at Coney Island. The year is 1965. Mom always wears lipstick, hot pink or orange. And *rouge*, as she calls it, which I like to watch her apply by first touching her lips and rubbing some of the lipstick into her cheekbones. Her face always has a greasy shine to it (she never applies face powder), which only makes her large nose stand out between her two small blue eyes.

We jump in the back seat and she begins driving us down Flatbush Avenue, then all the way into the City. After a while, it becomes clear that she has no idea where she is going or why. “Ma, where is the office already?” my sister calls out. “Soon. Don’t you like driving around with me?”

Neither of us replies. The longer she drives, the more we understand there is no office to show us. My sister and I are silent. Our mom is having one of her breakdowns, we both realize, as we give each other a knowing look. We are in danger. It has happened before. Mom is out of control. Who knows where she is taking us, what she will do. We need help. Fast.

Mom stops the car at a red light and my sister jumps out, saying to me, “Wait here.” I jump out after her, running right behind her. I am afraid to be left alone with my mom in this state, it feels safer to stay with my sister. I see Marla has spotted a cop and is running up to him, crying out, “Help! Help! Please help us! Our mother is running away with us. She’s having a nervous breakdown. Please, please call our dad!”

Surely my mother comes running up at this point. Is she yelling? Is she telling the cop to take his hands off her kids? How does he know to trust my sister and me and not my mother? Is my mom so obviously crazy-looking at this point?

All I know is that the cop, tall and handsome, looking like an Irish version of my dad, grasps each of us by the hand and says, “Mrs. Dolin, I’m going to have to ask you to wait here until your husband shows up to sort things out.” He has already radioed the station and someone there has miraculously located my dad, who arrives in about twenty minutes. How lucky we are he was in the office and not out of town on one of his sales trips.

“Daddy, Daddy.” I run to embrace him, knowing we are safe, and I get caught up in a queasy, familiar feeling of relief mingled with guilt: I am betraying my mother, showing my dad how relieved I am to be rescued from her, which I know means she will be taken away—hospitalized—for who knows how long. I will lose her and she will lose me.

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At the movie's denouement, when Jo and her husband are in the embassy where they suspect their son is being hidden, Jo sings the song "Che Será, Será" once more, belting it out and accompanying herself on the piano, in an effort to distract the guests while Ben goes in search of Hank. Now the boy looks genuinely frightened and bereft, as he leans his tear-stained cheek against the back of a damasked loveseat. Perhaps he has sensed from Mrs. Drayton that his life is in danger. As he sits there weeping, he recognizes his mother's singing from faraway, muffled though it is. Hank's female captor, Mrs. Drayton, has taken pity on the boy because she knows her husband has been ordered to silence him permanently. She asks Hank to whistle the tune as loudly as he can so someone can locate him. His mother hears him and so does his father, who eventually is able to rescue him.

*

One weekend, the summer I turn ten, my parents take me and my sister for a drive upstate. I have no memory of packing a suitcase, perhaps my mother did it for me. After several hours, my dad stops the car in front of a wooden building in the woods, hands me over with the family's small powder-blue suitcase to a woman I have never seen before, says good bye, and quickly drives away with everyone but me.

Or that, at least, is my sketchy memory of what happened. Even here I am straining to fill in the details.

What am I doing here? I find myself in a large cabin with about two dozen beds lining the walls. I soon realize I am the only white girl. The black girls are kind to me, but I am too frightened, feel too different, to make friends.

This is 1966. I attend a public elementary school, P.S. 119—a mixture of Jewish, Italian, and black children. I have Jewish and Italian friends and an occasional Irish friend from the neighborhood who goes to parochial school, but no black friends. My school is "integrated," but still racially segregated when it comes to friendships.

Each evening, I watch, with a kind of horror and fascination, the black girls in the bunk ironing their hair. It must be right before Afros are in style. They help each other perform this nightly ritual. I strain to picture it. One girl leans her head forward (or else backward) over the ironing board and another slowly runs an iron over her draped hair, which looks like raw black cotton, flattening it out as much as she can. I have never seen such a thing nor do I entirely understand it, being white and having long, thin straight hair that I always wish was thick and curly.

I spend each night face up on my cot, looking at the ceiling and crying, as I count the wooden planks that run across the width of the roof and meet at the middle beam: *One plank. Two planks. Three planks. Four planks. Crying. Keep going. Five. Six. Seven. Eight.* Again and again. Crying. Crying. At night until I fall asleep. Crying during the day.

There is a lake that I never swim in. I spend my day sitting in the nurse's office. The staff probably has no idea what to do with me. *Why have my parents left me here?*

These are the images I have been able to conjure from my memory: The girls ironing their hair. A lake through the trees. The planks in the ceiling that I count each night in bed. My crying, which I do for long bouts. Crying is the only weather I know.

After one week, my mom and dad show up. My parents have brought along a popular novelty toy that they know I have wanted and they give it to me as soon as we get back in the car. It is called Bupkis: a greasy, rubbery, plump figure, the size of my hot-chocolate mug, whose sallow-yellow body is all face with a huge painted-on toothy smile, jiggly arms coming out of where its ears should be, and skinny legs dangling from each side of its chin.

Bupkis means nothing, zilch, nada, in Yiddish. Bupkis. That is all I want from my parents: to be with them. They tried to give me a sleep-away camp experience, when all I want is to be riding in the back seat of our car, going home with them.

Years later, I realize my parents had dropped me off at a Fresh Air Camp. My failed sleep-away camp experience felt, as time passed, as real and unreal to me as a nightmare. My parents never mentioned it again and I bracketed it off from my life. When anyone asks, "Did you ever go to sleep-away camp?" I always say no, finding it too shameful to talk about, perhaps until now. How could my friends understand? I felt like I had been given away, against my will, a kind of abduction in which my parents were complicit. I thought I might not survive.