

## Michael Downs

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### *Mrs. Liszak*

Ten minutes into the movie and the only seat left was in the front row. Suzanne Randall thought that was where the old woman should sit, the one who had come in late clutching a pillow and carrying something in what was either a pillowcase or a large pouch, and who stood watching the movie from the aisle. Now and then the woman peered around the theater as if pleading with the darkness to offer her a seat. Her helplessness distracted Suzanne. Apparently it also distracted her date, an Eagle Scout with pink knuckles and a '75 Firebird who was the nuns' favorite at South Catholic High School. He had asked her to the movie, Suzanne believed, only because it was saintly to spend time with the girl who had no parents and no car. Suzanne's sister had said, "Any guy on a Friday night," and badgered her to go. But now her date excused himself and left his seat to show the woman to the one that was empty. Suzanne watched the Eagle Scout point, and then he and the woman spoke in whispers, and then the woman started toward the vacant seat beside Suzanne. The Eagle Scout shrugged an apology before heading to the open chair down front.

The woman's old-lady perfume preceded her. She bumped Suzanne as she arranged herself: an elbow here, a knee there. Just when it seemed the woman would settle down, she opened her bag. She took from it packages wrapped in wax paper. Whatever was inside the packages stank of garlic. Suzanne hated the woman.

"She said she couldn't see from the front," the Eagle Scout explained after they found each other in the lobby. "She asked to trade seats. She's older than my mother. What was I going to do?"

They saw her again as they stepped from the theater into the Hartford night. Cars inching through after-movie traffic steered around her, and drivers honked as she strode the center line of Washington Avenue, caught in the now-and-then headlights. At the bright moments Suzanne could see her clearly, and something about the woman's straight back, her head carried high, made Suzanne dislike her even more. She wore heels and a neat skirt and a puffy blouse. Her hair—gray and black, thick, unruly—added to a sense of majesty Suzanne

hadn't noticed in the theater. What power, she wondered, could make such a woman appear helpless in the aisle? Drivers yelled at her to get out of the fucking road.

"Of course," said the Eagle Scout, with sudden recognition. "That's Mrs. Liszak."

Her? That was Mrs. Liszak? Even though Suzanne was only a year or so in the neighborhood, she had heard of the woman with the scar. She had been burned in a famous fire years ago, people said. Now she did odd things like play hopscotch by herself or waltz without music on street corners.

In the center of the street, Mrs. Liszak smiled as she tried to thumb a ride from teenaged drivers steering toward a kegger or to the reservoir to neck. The Eagle Scout frowned, and Suzanne knew he wrestled again with the dilemma of date versus duty, but she said nothing when he called out to Mrs. Liszak, who accepted his invitation for a ride. The Firebird had only two doors, and Suzanne meant to keep her spot in front, so after some hesitation Mrs. Liszak squeezed into the back, pushing aside cassette tapes and dirty chammies and bringing with her the odor of strong garlic. She thanked them. She spoke with an accent—Russian or something, Suzanne thought.

"Where to, Mrs. Liszak?" said the Eagle Scout.

"Take me some place beautiful or some place strange," she said. "No place dangerous. Strange or beautiful only."

"What about home?" said the Eagle Scout.

"Strange or beautiful only," she said again.

They drove with electric guitars loud on the tape deck and the car windows open. Suzanne stared out her window, trying to ignore the Eagle Scout and their surprise chaperone. The Eagle Scout fiddled with his mirrors, his attention here, then there, as if he were watching for the dripping, toothy monster from the movie. It had been a scary movie but did not frighten Suzanne who had been too aware of gasping teenagers and Mrs. Liszak's garlic to lose herself. This was how it was with her and theaters. Nothing on the screen ever convinced her to leave the crowd.

Now the Eagle Scout drove them through boring downtown, then past the winos at South Green, then on to the Silas Deane Highway. There they passed the gas station where Suzanne sat twenty-eight hours a week in a glass booth, taking money and writing down license plate numbers. She thought of the reservoir and necking.

"I see these streets all the time," said Mrs. Liszak.

“I won’t take this car into the North End or Frog Hollow,” said the Eagle Scout. “They’ll steal the hubcaps while we’re moving.”

“How about Massachusetts?” said Mrs. Lizabeth, and the Eagle Scout barked.

Suzanne turned, said as if giving an order: “Buy us some beer.”

“Bad idea,” the Eagle Scout mumbled to the steering wheel.

“I only brought money for the movie,” said Mrs. Lizabeth.

Suzanne put her hand on the Eagle Scout’s corduroy-covered thigh. He owed her for this terrible date. “You have cash,” she said. He looked cuter now that he was nervous.

After a stop at a package store, they parked across from Trinity College. The Eagle Scout led, a blanket he’d pulled from his trunk rolled and tucked under his arm like a football. Suzanne wanted to hurry, but the Eagle Scout made her wait so that Mrs. Lizabeth, slower in her heels and her age, could keep up. They passed from dark place to dark place to avoid the college cops, but once came into a lighted archway, and Suzanne noticed then the dull lavender-colored scar that covered half of Mrs. Lizabeth’s forehead and spread around her right eye down her cheek. Because stealth and speed were important, Suzanne did not take time to stare, but from the few glances she stole, the scar seemed exotic and revelatory.

The college’s lawn sloped away from its gothic dormitories into a comfortable darkness where they spread the blanket and peeled open beer cans and sat watching the city lights. They kept silent for a long time until the beer and the night sky turned them toward talk. Mrs. Lizabeth judged the lawn and the surrounding campus to be beautiful but not so strange. She revealed that she was not Russian, no: Polish. Suzanne announced that she wanted one day to have a dog. Then she told the others that she forgave them, that there were worse things to do on a Friday night than drink beer with a neighborhood flamingo and a cute guy. Mrs. Lizabeth said she liked being called a flamingo. The Eagle Scout sipped his fourth beer and swiveled his head, keeping watch like the nervous man in the movie whose nervousness meant he would die next. Suzanne made a pillow of the Eagle Scout’s lap, and his cologne made her crave licorice. She wished his hands toward her, even just to rest on her, but he kept hold of his beer can, sipping. Now and then the three of them paused to consider the echo of car speakers, the backfires that might have been gunshots, or the sounds of insects and small animals rustling near them in the grass.

“I have seen the largest rat,” Mrs. Lizabeth said.

The Eagle Scout looked around. “Where?” he said.

“Behind the typewriter factory on New Park Avenue,” said Mrs. Lizabeth. “In a culvert. She came out of the storm drain while I watched. She didn’t creep. She wasn’t careful. Her tail is thick as a tree branch. Her fur shines. Her black eyes are as big as yours. There is no rat larger. Not in Puerto Rico or Siam or East Germany.”

Suzanne laughed. “How do you know it’s a her?” she said.

“Because only a woman can be so magnificent.”

The Eagle Scout giggled. Mrs. Lizabeth reached across the blanket and tapped his head with her knuckles, as if rapping on a door. “You’re a smart boy,” she said.

Then the Eagle Scout and Suzanne argued whether Sister Katherine, who taught history, was a bitch. Mrs. Lizabeth translated into Polish phrases from the movie (“I wonder what happened to the rest of the crew?” and “Lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky”). They discussed the examples of the saints. Suzanne asked about Mrs. Lizabeth’s husband. “The only strange and beautiful thing he loves is me,” she said. “I always come home. He never worries.” She did not speak about her scar and Suzanne did not ask. Nor did Suzanne give away anything of consequence about her own life. Though Mrs. Lizabeth was seductive, she also seemed untrustworthy, perhaps even greedy. Suzanne kept her own pain like a treasure.

Later, after the Eagle Scout bragged that this was the first time he’d ever been drunk, Mrs. Lizabeth took his car keys. She drove, even though the Firebird was a stick shift.

Outside Suzanne’s house, Mrs. Lizabeth left the car and met Suzanne on the moonlit sidewalk, promising that she’d see the Eagle Scout to his door. “Thank you for sharing this night,” she said to Suzanne, then stepped close, tickling Suzanne’s cheeks with strands of her unruly hair. She kissed Suzanne’s lips.

Mrs. Lizabeth hummed something flat and out of tune as she walked back to the car, and Suzanne thought the melody funny and beautiful. She drew a circle on the sidewalk with her toe. The Eagle Scout offered a thumbs-up out the passenger window as they drove away; the taillights of the Firebird described their trail.

In bed, Suzanne licked her lips to recall the kiss. The surprise of it had stayed with her as she undressed, as her head rested on the pillow

and she pulled over herself a stiff polyester sheet. The kiss played childhood games inside her and invited her to play along. Her own lips were softer than Mrs. Liszak's, but clumsy, not so proficient. Mrs. Liszak's kiss had been quick and casual, like a handshake—but happier. Her breath had been spiced with garlic and beer.

THE NEXT MORNING it rained. Suzanne lay in bed until the night's beer and the rainwater running along the gutters forced her to the bathroom. As she peed, she could hear the TV through the door, but not her sister's voice, or that of her sister's husband. She washed her hands and face and noticed a new pimple near her hairline, which she wiped cool with a cotton ball dabbed with rubbing alcohol.

Suzanne lived with Karen and Howard and their little girl Chryssie on the third floor of a three-family house to the east of Goodwin Park. There was the only family living there: the second-floor tenant had recently been evicted, and the old woman on the first floor was hard of hearing and had her meals delivered by St. Cyril's. The building was like all the three-family houses in the neighborhood—rectangular, flat-faced, home to pigeons—except that from their back porch hung a weather-faded banner bearing the insignia of the Oakland Raiders. Suzanne lived with her sister because their mother was dead and their father was gone. Their mother had bled to death in the hours after Suzanne was born. Through the ensuing years, their father prolonged his grief through gin and became helpless. The day Karen turned eighteen she eloped with Howard, who had an apartment in the city. Nearly two years later, Suzanne, then fifteen, moved in with them. She hadn't wanted to, but Karen needed help with Chryssie, and their father encouraged it. Then he sold the house and moved away. Suzanne and Karen only knew this when a cashier's check arrived one day with a note. The note did not say where Mr. Randall had gone. "Love each other," he wrote. "Think kindly of me." Karen told Suzanne to toss the note in the trash. With the money, Karen paid debts that had come with her baby girl, bought a new used Z-car, and invested in savings bonds to pay for Chryssie's college. Karen put Suzanne's share in the bank and used it to pay the tuition at the Catholic high school. The rest, she said, Suzanne would receive when she turned eighteen.

Suzanne did not miss her mother. How could she when she had never known her? Her mother was to her a curiosity, the explanation for her red hair and milky skin, but little else. She imagined left-handed

people wondered about being right-handed in the same way she wondered about growing up with a mother. She knew people pitied her, and she had the sense that she'd lost something—a security, or a snugness, a confidence that other people took for granted—because she'd had no mother. She felt her mother was not even hers. Mrs. Randall, in her death, belonged solely to Karen, who sanctified her mother's memory, and who still wept for her with no warning, and those tears made for hard silences between the sisters.

When Suzanne came barefoot from the bathroom that morning she found Karen at the table cutting grocery coupons. Howard sat in his rocking recliner with an ashtray balanced on the over-stuffed arm. He studied maps in a road atlas, looking up now and then at the Saturday morning cartoon on the television. He'd lost his production line job a few months back and hadn't been able to find another. But he had a friend who'd moved to California and who had once made Howard a long-standing offer of work. The last week Howard called him and accepted. He planned to leave Monday.

Chryssie, who was two and a few months, lay in the middle of the living room carpet on her belly, scribbling with crayons on construction paper. Suzanne said hello to everyone, but only Karen replied. Suzanne said to Chryssie, "What about my kiss?" and Chryssie said, "No."

In the kitchen, Suzanne poured her morning Mr. Pibb. "You came in late," said Karen, walking near. Gently, she turned Suzanne by the shoulders, peered at her pimple, and put cool fingertips against the skin. Suzanne thought again of Mrs. Liszak and realized she remembered no time when she and Karen had kissed, not even a cheek peck. Now she jerked forward and kissed her sister's lips.

"What's wrong with you?" Karen said. She laughed and looked as if a dog had licked her face. "What's that all about?"

"It's too quiet this morning," Suzanne said. "Are you and Howard fighting?"

"No. There's just little to say now." Karen stared at the pimple. "This one looks ready to pop."

"You're thinking of going to California," Suzanne said.

"Howard's going, not me or Chryssie."

"I don't believe you."

"You made me choose," Karen said. "You better appreciate the choice I've made."

“Howard’s the one who chose.”

It was cruel to say so, and not even true, really, and Suzanne wanted to take it back. They had often all three talked about California. Jobs paid more, Howard said. He wanted to raise Chryssie in a place where the sun shined. Karen wanted California, too. But Suzanne refused to leave Hartford. When she thought of leaving, her insides felt strangled. She had the sense California would shrink her to invisibility, make her impossible to find among all those people and lanes of traffic and that relentless good weather. She could not abide the idea of never being found.

Now Karen turned her back, and Suzanne felt selfish, and she felt worse when Karen reached in the fridge for an orange, which she handed to Suzanne. “Enjoy breakfast,” Karen said.

On the back porch, rain pop-popped on the roof. Suzanne sat on a rusted lounge chair without a cushion, and the springs squeaked. Howard had left another ashtray there, and she moved it to the top of some cardboard boxes that were filled with empty cans and bottles, saved for the nickel deposit. She checked out the neighborhood. Her new habit involved spying on neighbors from the porch. Most seemed harmless or dull. But there was also the man with the bald head who lived alone and who sat on his porch at night without any lights on. And the young woman who wept with her curtains drawn and windows thrown open. And the olive-skinned couple who sometimes had visits from the police. Suzanne had not had a porch like this in the house with her father, and they hadn’t lived near so many neighbors. She never knew this pleasure until she moved to Hartford, but now it seemed necessary that she spy on customers from inside her glass booth, that she watch fellow students and teachers from the back rows of her classrooms, that she see the neighborhood from her high perch. Suzanne spied on everyone and drew their faces in her sketchbook, which she kept with a box of colored pencils and a sharpener in a satchel that had been her father’s in the Army. She drew half a dozen faces a page, or one on a page, and sometimes she drew people with photograph-like reality and other times if it seemed more real she turned them into Nile Queens or Mongol warriors or zoo animals—baring their lips to show fangs, or making them howl. She drew Chryssie and Karen and Howard, too, sketching them from different perspectives: Howard’s lollipop face from the right and above; Karen’s with its too apparent skull straight on, but from below. Suzanne filled

pages of spiral-bound drawing pads with people: crowds and crowds as ugly and beautiful as she could make them, and when she couldn't make them beautiful or ugly she added word bubbles so her badly-sketched faces could admonish her: "Draw, you lame weasel!" She never showed her drawings, and at school her "no" ended all overtures of friendship. But friendship meant less to her than the faces; she feared that students who saw them would talk about them and their words would rob the faces of their magic. She could not say why, but she knew she depended on them. When not drawing in the book, she paged through it, recalling the attention she'd given each face, the decisions she'd made as she captured it. This felt to her something like love. Now, she sharpened a lavender-colored pencil and brushed away the shavings, then found an empty page.

Suzanne sketched a tiny Mrs. Lizsak. Then another. Small versions, trying to get the face right—its majesty, its helplessness—trying to remember the scar. From one angle, she drew it like a kidney. From another like a splash of ink from a leaky fountain pen. Once like half a butterfly.

SHE WAS SCHEDULED to work Monday when Howard meant to leave. She had been glad to get out of the apartment because he wouldn't speak to her, and Karen was red-eyed and busy telling him what he needed to pack ("Do you have your umbrella?" she asked. "What about your mustache trimmer?"). Business at the gas station was slow, so Suzanne sketched more Mrs. Liszaks and worried that Howard might after all take Karen and Chryssie with him. She thought about Howard so much that afternoon, she wasn't surprised to see him park his Chevy Impala at Pump No. 8, regular. She put her pencil on the cash register and watched. He wiped his forehead and retied his shoe as he waited for the tank to fill, then he topped it off for an even six dollars. Suzanne waved as he approached the booth, but he ignored her. She said, "Hi Howard." He only slipped the money through the cashier's well. He never blinked. As he backed away, he looked at her, then saluted with an "*Adios*, pardner" kind of wave that made her mouth go dry.

Once, months before, as she climbed the stairs to the apartment, glad to be home from work or school (she'd forgotten which), Howard had stumbled past her, his face red and twisted, Karen's sobs trailing after him. Howard paused only long enough to say, "You'll wreck our

marriage.” Then, his boot heels pounded the stairboards and the downstairs door slammed shut. When he was gone, Suzanne could still see the hate in his face, more powerful than anything she’d known, greater than what they taught at church or school, passionate enough to engulf the stairwell with fire. Now, from the glass booth, as she watched him drive away from his wife and daughter, those words returned (“You’ll wreck our marriage”), and they echoed over the hours, even as she slipped her timecard into the clock and heard the mechanisms punch.

In the apartment, she found Karen yelling at Chryssie to stop screaming, to stop making so much noise, that if she didn’t stop making so much noise Mommy would be very angry.

Suzanne waited by the door. She waited for Karen to say something.

“Please take Chryssie out of here,” Karen said. “I can’t stand it right now.”

“I’m sorry,” said Suzanne. She lifted Chryssie, whose shoes were untied. Chryssie kicked-kicked-kicked and one shoe fell off her foot to the floor. “I wanted him to change his mind,” Suzanne said.

“If she’s here and she’s screaming I can’t talk to him,” said Karen. “He’s supposed to call when he reaches Pittsburgh.”

SUZANNE SEARCHED THE phone book for the name *Lishack*. Then for *Lyshack*. Then for *Lichack*. Then for *Lisiak*. She called the Eagle Scout to ask if he knew how to spell the name, but he said he couldn’t talk to her anymore, not since his old man found him asleep on their stoop that Saturday morning, smelly and sick and still wasted.

She looked for Mrs. Liszak at Mass. In the glass booth at work, she waited for Mrs. Liszak’s face to appear. On the way to the park with Chryssie, they sometimes walked blocks out of their way to read mailboxes for names that might be Liszak. She knew what the school counselor would say: “You think about this woman all the time because you want her to be your mother.” But that wasn’t true. Suzanne wanted to watch Mrs. Liszak. She wanted to study her. There was something in the way Mrs. Liszak had moved through the night; she seemed only to gain things, she lost nothing. Eventually, in August, on the way to work, Suzanne stopped at the local Polish deli and said to the woman behind the counter: “Spell Liszak.”

Home after her shift, Suzanne looked up the name in the phone

book and found one—Lizsak, Charlie—on Barker Street, and she figured that must be Mister. Outside, the night was damp and dark. She carried her satchel, and she walked slow enough to count the address numbers on houses. A nearby streetlight and the moon shined on the Lizsaks' house, which itself was lit by a porch light. Suzanne could see the house clearly. It reminded her less of a city house than of those in the suburb where she and her father and Karen had lived. It was two stories with decorative shutters and shiny windows and a trimmed lawn. An apron of marigolds encircled an elm tree. A bird feeder shaped like a steepled church stood nearby, along with two painted roosters. A waist-high chain-link fence bordered the property and rose bushes followed the fence, and the gate was latched. No car sat in the driveway, and the sidewalk mailbox sported stenciled letters spelling out the family name. She thought it must be the house of a retired man, and in fact Suzanne saw an older man sitting alone on the front porch. She noticed him only when he waved—the friendly wave of a retired man—and she nodded in his direction by way of returning the courtesy, then hurried away, embarrassed to have been caught spying and disappointed that she couldn't have lingered longer.

FROM CALIFORNIA, HOWARD sent packages with money. He sent Polaroid photographs. He wasn't a letter writer, and long distance cost too much. Instead, he recorded himself on a cassette tape, and he and Karen mailed it back and forth. Karen would take the tape player and lie on her bed to listen—sometimes cuddling with Chryssie, sometimes alone. She listened to the same recording twice, three times. The voice that haunted the apartment was not Howard's voice, but a robot's voice, full of clicks and scratches, careful and distant, unlike the voice they remembered and too much like it. This voice tried to assure Karen, and she listened over and over as if waiting for the assurance to take hold. "I'm making a bundle out here, you wouldn't believe it," he said. "In California, sweet girl, the sun shines, and you can buy Coors, and the Raiders are on TV all the frickin' time."

THE APARTMENT HAD never been comfortable; it grew worse. Karen stopped at the laundromat less often, and she never folded, just took clean, wrinkled clothes from the basket as she or Chryssie needed them and told Suzanne to do whatever. She threw fliers away without cutting coupons. If Suzanne didn't wash the dirty dishes, they stacked in the sink and on the counter and stank and lured cockroaches from the drain

pipes. When light bulbs burned out, they stayed that way. The four chairs around the dining room table became three when a chair leg broke and Karen left the pieces on the sidewalk with the trash. Every weekend, Karen took Chryssie for drives in the Z-car. At first, they left and returned before lunch. But then they stayed away past lunch and then past dinner. And then, it was not just the weekends, but also after work.

Each time Suzanne came home and found the Z-car missing, she locked the front door behind her, then searched room to room for what might have vanished while she was gone. She made a checklist of things Karen might take should she leave: the framed Sacred Heart that had been their mother's; Karen's high heel shoes stacked in apple crates; a Polaroid on the kitchen bulletin board of Suzanne and Karen at Misquamicut Beach the day they traded bikini tops; Chryssie's polyester bed quilt of pastel tulips and daffodils. Only when Suzanne was satisfied that everything was in its place could she relax and paint her fingernails or watch game shows or sit on the porch, drawing faces and spying on the bald man who sat in the dark or the young woman who wept. She ate bags of noodles that cooked in five minutes, and she drank Mr. Pibb.

When Karen and Chryssie came home, Suzanne tried to sound nonchalant when she said "Hey strangers, how'd the day go?" Karen shrugged her answer and Chryssie wanted to play with dolls. Then, the two would go away again.

A GOLDEN DUSK in late September and once more the Z-car was gone. Suzanne, off the bus from work, turned away, unwilling to face the empty apartment, to count proofs of Karen's presence, then wait to hear Karen's key in the lock. She walked instead, envious of people she passed: a pair of joggers, girls playing jump rope, a family she spied through lit windows who fought with gestures and loud words even as they shared a spaghetti dinner. Halfway to Barker Street she wondered whether she should have left a note for Karen but decided Karen deserved none.

She rang the Liszaks' doorbell and Mrs. Liszak's husband answered. He was flat faced with horn-rimmed glasses and brown eyes that suggested a practiced capacity for patience. He stood stooped but strong, his fingernails thick and his hands scaly, coarse hair graying on his knuckles. He wore suspenders with his pants and an old dress shirt with the cuffs tucked inward once, as if he wanted them out of the way

but not rolled in the manner of a cowboy or tough guy. Suzanne smelled something sweet coming off him, perhaps pipe smoke. She asked for Mrs. Liszak.

“Ah, the girl who thinks Sister Katherine is a bitch,” said Mrs. Liszak. It sounded funny hearing an old woman say *bitch*, and Suzanne wanted to hear Mrs. Liszak say it again. Karen, playing mother, had always said Suzanne was too pretty to let such ugly words cross her lips.

The porch light shined, and for the first time Suzanne could see clearly Mrs. Liszak’s face. Suzanne hadn’t gotten it all wrong in the sketches, but she had concentrated too much on the scar, drawing a gargoyle rather than a woman. She could see now that the scar wasn’t so pronounced. Instead, she noticed that Mrs. Liszak’s face had been pretty once, perhaps even beautiful, and she decided to draw it that way next time. Sketching old people, she had learned, meant drawing two people at once: the aged one and the one hidden by age. The scar, she guessed, had in Mrs. Liszak’s youth enhanced her beauty. But now the scar mattered less when matched against her yellowed teeth or the lines notched over her upper lip.

“What brings you to my door?” asked Mrs. Liszak as her husband stepped back inside. “Would you like to come in?”

Suzanne chose between truths and said, “I want to see the Rat Queen.”

“Ah, no,” said Mrs. Liszak. “A waste of time.” She stepped onto the porch and leaned low to read Suzanne’s nametag on her work uniform. “Suzanne,” she said. “I’d forgotten your name. Sit, Suzanne,” and Mrs. Liszak eased herself into a rocking chair webbed with neat, taut nylon.

“Really, I’d like to see the rats,” said Suzanne.

Mrs. Liszak again waved Suzanne toward a chair.

“Do your parents know you’re here, asking an elegant woman to take you to see rats?” said Mrs. Liszak.

“Yes,” said Suzanne.

“Liar,” said Mrs. Liszak. “No parent would agree to such a thing.”

“They’re out of town,” said Suzanne.

Mrs. Liszak pulled her shawl tight against the cooling evening. She wore high heels now, as she had at the movie, and a skirt with a lacy hem that frayed.

“Who takes care of you when your parents are gone?”

“I have a sister. But I’m sixteen. I can handle things.”

“The largest rat had testicles,” said Mrs. Liszak. “It wasn’t a woman

after all. I was very disappointed. Where are your parents visiting?”

“California.”

“We have a son in North Carolina,” said Mrs. Lizabeth. “What shall we do instead of the rats?”

Suzanne reached into her satchel and brought out her sketchpad. “Let me draw you,” she said.

“What a tremendous idea,” said Mrs. Lizabeth.

Mrs. Lizabeth turned off the porch light, then faced the windows that cast brightness from inside. “This is better lighting, don’t you think?” she said. She hummed again the out-of-key melody from the night of the movie. Suzanne thought of carousel horses limping toward the end of a ride. She began to shape the face, but right away saw that she’d made a mistake. She turned to a new page.

“In the movie we saw,” asked Mrs. Lizabeth, “did it scare you when the baby monster exploded from the man’s chest?” She sat with her back straight, her bosom lifted and out a bit. From inside, the television made sounds of gunplay and doors smashed open and screams.

“No,” said Suzanne. “It was the coolest part.”

“Did any part scare you?”

“It was just a movie,” Suzanne said.

Now and then she noticed Mrs. Lizabeth trying to hold her pose and at the same time watch Suzanne work. Suzanne decided not to turn again to a new page, but to push through her second effort, which was failing, too. In pencil, Mrs. Lizabeth’s earrings looked to be hanging from the ends of green onions.

Mrs. Lizabeth’s husband opened the porch door, bringing a tray of sodas and a bowl of potato chips. “Chef Charlie at your service,” he said. “Everyone wants to capture the woman with the scar. Drawings. Paintings. Photos.” He laughed. “I’ve got a scar, too,” he said, and he lifted his shirt so high it covered his face. Blind, he traced with one finger a pink welt across his abdomen. “Appendix,” he said. “I’ve also got a ripper on my calf from a rock that shot out of my lawn mower. Wanna draw that?”

“There’s room for only one star on this stage,” said Mrs. Lizabeth, “and one face on that page. You are dismissed, Kazimierz.”

“Madam,” he said and blew her a kiss before exiting.

So, Suzanne was not the first. She wondered if others had this much difficulty. How had they recreated Mrs. Lizabeth? She imagined her a willowy face, like those of the ballerinas painted by the man obsessed

with dancers. She imagined her as a Virgin Mary from the Renaissance, a radiance from heaven sanctifying her scar. Suzanne played with the colors, trying with purples and oranges to capture the energy around Mrs. Lizabeth's eyes.

"How did you get the scar?" Suzanne asked.

Mrs. Lizabeth stopped humming her out-of-tune melody. When she spoke, her voice was conversational, matter-of-fact, as if she had told this tale a thousand thousand times. But Suzanne heard something like pride, too, at owning a story so much in demand.

The circus staked its tent outdoors on Barbour Street that hot July day nearly four decades past. Nobody knew then what made the fire. Nobody knew since. But the tent burned. Fire flew up the walls, glided over the canvas, consumed it. Fiery pieces of the tent collapsed into the crowd, like Hell, the white fires of Hell, the heart of a furnace, windy, roaring. Animal cries came from the mouths of lions and elephants and people. Children. Children in tears and panic, children who were knee-high and waist-high, crawling over the ragdoll bodies of the dead. The dead in piles near the animal chute. The dead in piles near the tent walls. Mrs. Lizabeth could not remember whether she had wanted to die, but she lived. Her son, Teddy, who was then only three years old (and Suzanne thought of Chrissy coloring on the apartment floor) also had not died. It was an old story, Mrs. Lizabeth said, and though she sometimes thought the memories were gone, they could still—when she least expected them—bring her to her knees: the brassy shouts of the circus band trombones; the squeak of rubber-soled shoes as the nurse came to peel Mrs. Lizabeth's charred flesh; Teddy's strangled breathing in his hospital bed.

Suzanne penciled a brown shadow near the nose, paying less attention to that than to the thought that someone rescued Mrs. Lizabeth and her boy. Someone must have dragged them away. Suzanne imagined purposeful hands (and saw the thick, scaly hands of Mrs. Lizabeth's husband and saw her father's), and she envied Mrs. Lizabeth.

"Who rescued you?" she asked.

Mrs. Lizabeth shrugged her shoulders. "I never knew."

"Did someone hear you yelling?"

"I can't remember."

"But you survived."

"We were fortunate. Others were not."

It was not what Suzanne wanted to hear, and she felt a small start

of anger. She studied her sketch. She needed a red pencil, but when she looked she couldn't find one in her satchel.

"But you have this nice house," she said. "You have your husband."

"What has that to do with the fire?"

What had that to do? Everything. It had everything to do with the fire. On the night of the kiss, Suzanne had watched as Mrs. Lizabeth gained things: a seat in a crowded theater, a ride, companionship, an evening that was strange and beautiful. How? How had she been among those who survived the fire? What made her different? What quality gained her this husband, this home? Suzanne had thought (or sensed or hoped) that what had scarred Mrs. Lizabeth's face had also taught her this trick. Suffering brought help. Pain had power to attract those rescuing hands. It must. You just had to know how to use it. But now all the old woman could say was "We were fortunate. Others were not" as if all suffering—Suzanne's, too—were an accident, a coin flip, a dice roll. She could lose forever.

Suzanne found the red pencil but stopped drawing. Mrs. Lizabeth noticed, then stood as if the sitting were ended. She stretched: an invitation, it seemed, for the world to inhabit her body. That night's kiss had convinced Suzanne that Mrs. Lizabeth would share her secret of loss and gain. But now, everything about her seemed to be an act. Look at her, Suzanne thought. She pretends the world owes her, but what did it take from her in that burning tent? A mother? A father? No, nothing. Nothing. In the accident that was the world, Suzanne had lost more, lost faster.

She snapped her red pencil. "Why did your son leave you?" she said. "Did he hate you?"

Mrs. Lizabeth looked at Suzanne the way Karen had in the days before Howard left.

"He went to college in North Carolina," she said. "Then he got a job there."

"He could have gotten a job here," said Suzanne. "He must not have wanted to come back to you."

"Aren't you cruel," said Mrs. Lizabeth.

"No!" cried Suzanne, as she stuffed her sketch pad and pencils into her satchel. "No, I'm not. I'm not!"

Later, home from Barker Street, she saw that there was still no Z-car downstairs. Inside, too, she found no one. Gone from their places were their mother's framed Sacred Heart and Chryssie's quilt of tulips

and daffodils. But on the tabletop: five twenty-dollar bills, a bankbook with a balance of more than four thousand dollars, and a note in Karen's perfect handwriting.

"Forgive me," was all it said.

THAT NIGHT SUZANNE lay in bed awake. She turned out her bedside light, hoping to sleep, but heard clawing she'd never before noticed from inside the walls. She tried to ignore it, but the clawing persisted, and she imagined rats there, climbing the pipes and the 2x4s, gnawing through the plaster. She turned the light on, and the sound stopped. She brought a pillow from Karen's bed into her own and curled herself around it. She heard the old house gurgle and click. She imagined Karen and Chryssie bloody inside the Z-car that had been wrapped around a telephone pole. She imagined Howard in a black rage at the apartment door. Suzanne's eyes watered from sleepiness, so she clicked off the light, then listened for clawing inside the walls, and when she heard it fumbled the light on again. She stepped to the kitchen, light switch to light switch. She drank a beer Howard had left. She imagined rats nesting in her box spring. It was just past two in the morning. Then it was 2:06. 2:06. 2:07. She played the radio but the sound exaggerated the emptiness of the rooms. She called the station to talk with the DJ.

"Hey, you sound kind of sweet," he said.

"I am," she said.

"I've got to change a record, but don't go away," he said, and while he was gone she hung up.

She tried to finish homework. She found her first-confession rosary and tried to pray. She prayed for daylight, squeezing the beads so hard they left red marks in her skin. She brought Mr. Pibb and stale popcorn and a carrot into her bedroom and shut the door and then stared at the shut door suddenly afraid of what it hid from her.

In the morning, she stayed home from school. When the telephone rang, she startled, then stared as it trembled on the wall.

SUZANNE HAD BEEN alone for three weeks. Karen had written her a dozen letters. She pleaded with Suzanne to pick up the phone. She told her how wonderful California could be for a pretty girl, one who was smart, too. She told her how much a bus ticket cost. It wasn't much, she wrote in the letter. Suzanne could pay for it out of the savings account.

Suzanne always felt tired. Dark splotches appeared around her eyes.

Her hair went unwashed. She ate only bags of noodles and chocolate bars. She skipped school. At work, she pressed her face against the cold glass and played a radio loud to stay awake.

“You need coffee or something?” said a man who stood outside the booth. She leaned away from the cold glass, opened her eyes. He was bald and high-cheeked and a little familiar. Something about his posture, maybe, or the slope of his shoulders. He slid his gasoline dollars into the well. “I could get you coffee.”

She counted out the five and two ones, putting his change back in the well. He reached at the same time. His fingertips grazed hers.

“You live on Cromwell?” he said. She nodded.

“I’ve seen you walk by my house,” he said. “I’m on Chester. We’re neighbors.”

She recognized him now. It hadn’t occurred to her that while she was spying on the bald man, he had noticed her, too. “I thought I knew you,” she said.

“So, can I fetch you that coffee?” He smiled. He peeked at her breasts—no, maybe her nametag. How old was he? Twenty-four? Thirty-eight? She couldn’t tell because he’d shaved his head, and he looked athletic. A jogger, probably. He wore sneakers. She noticed that he drove a Japanese pickup, the bed filled with tools and sloppy buckets. A house painter. She shook her head: no, no coffee.

When she punched out that evening, she saw his truck parked across the street at the grocery store, halfway between the street and the grocery; she couldn’t be sure whether he was shopping. She watched his truck from the bus stop, watched it until the bus had carried her away. She thought of walking home a different route, told herself to grow up, then turned down Chester toward home. He spoke to her from the darkness of his front porch as she passed.

“What happened to that Raiders banner?” he called out. “Aren’t you a fan anymore?”

She hesitated before she said, “It was my brother-in-law’s.”

“So he’s not a fan anymore?” the bald man said.

She gave him a half smile, waved and walked on, hurrying a little. As she turned the corner, she glanced over her shoulder. The bald man followed, a house or two back. She walked faster.

“Kenny Stabler’s a great quarterback,” he said, loud enough that she could hear.

She started to jog. Her house was only a few away. She looked back,

but he wasn't running. Just walking, hands in the pockets of his shiny sweat pants, as if he were out for an evening stroll. At the top of the stairs, she tried to find the keys in her satchel, throwing out everything else—her sketchbook and all her pencils tumbling over the steps. Her hands shook, and she missed the keyhole once, twice. She heard the door open downstairs and heard footfalls on the steps. Then she had the apartment door open, and she slammed it behind her, twisted the deadbolt, ran the chain. "Oh god," she said. "Oh god." Suddenly, she worried that someone was already in the apartment. She didn't know which room would protect her and which room was a trap. He knocked on the door. "Suzanne? Did I do something wrong?" he said. His voice was soothing, quiet. "Did I scare you?" He knocked again. She remembered the back porch—had she locked it before work?—and ran to check. He was still speaking through the door when she came back, but he spoke so softly she couldn't hear him. She drew closer, leaned near the door. He said, "I'm sorry if I scared you. I was just making small talk. I only walked after you to apologize. I wouldn't do anything to you. My name's Weinbaum. You know where I live. Why would I do anything to you? I was just trying to be nice. You're right to lock the door. That's what your parents would want you to do. You're a good kid. A smart kid. I'm sorry if I scared you."

She felt her heartbeat in her throat, against her eardrums, in her fingertips. She realized she had been crying, the taste of salt on her lips. She crouched low at the door and listened. His voice frightened her, but it was so calm, so comforting, that it soothed her, too. She doubted her fear for a moment, thought that he might be right, that she was silly, overreacting, too sensitive. Her hands trembled when she placed her palms flat against the door as if she could feel him through the wood and paint, feel his honesty or deception, and she found that she wanted to feel honesty.

He said, "I'm leaving now. I'm sorry if I scared you."

"I'm fucking calling the cops!" she yelled.

"Okay. That's fine. I'm leaving now. I'm sorry."

She listened as he stepped down the first stair, and she heard floorboards creak as he turned onto the next flight. She gasped for breath and left her palms on the door, and she stayed there a long time until she felt certain of his absence, and was glad for it, and missed his voice. She hadn't yet stopped crying. She began to sob and to speak as she sobbed, only half-aware of what it was she was saying. "Daddy," she

gasped. “Daddy.”

FROM THE MOMENT Suzanne snuck their father’s last note back from the trash, she had imagined him still in her life.

She had seen such things in movies. She imagined that he sold the house, then moved into an apartment in Hartford. He knew it was best he stay away but—tortured by longing—came to the schoolyard in the morning to watch her start her day. He watched her walk home. He spied on her in the park when she took Chryssie there on the days Howard and Karen wanted the apartment to themselves. He arrived at Mass after the service began and admired her from the back pew, leaving just after communion. So in church, she turned to search the back rows, and she paused in the schoolyard to study cars parked nearby, and at the park and at the grocery store and even from the back porch of their apartment, she looked for him.

When in her fantasies she found him or when he showed himself to her, she forgave him.

AFTER THE BALD man left, she stayed in the house for four days. She kept the doors locked. She quit her job by not going. When she slept, she could not tell she was asleep. When she was awake, she could not tell she was awake. She ate nothing. She kept the television on but didn’t watch. She snuck once into the stairwell to retrieve her pencils and sketchbook. She tore drawings out of her sketchbook and taped them to the walls of the apartment and when she ran out of tape she stapled them and when she ran out of staples she used a hammer and nails. When she ran out of faces she drew more of them. She drew Karen and Howard and Chryssie. She drew her father. She drew the bald man. She drew until the tips of her pencils were nubs and then until the nubs were flat. Even then, there weren’t enough faces. The walls still had space.

THE LISZAKS WEREN’T home, so she sat on their porch to wait. She wore a wrinkled sweatshirt and frayed blue jeans and open-toed clogs, and she felt cold. It was morning and cloudy and damp. The Liszaks did not keep a blanket on their porch.

She had a plan. She was a girl in a crowded theater, and there was only one seat open. She had practiced her speech. Orphan girl. Abandoned by her sister. She could keep Mrs. Liszak’s husband

company on those days he waited for his wife to tire of what was strange and beautiful and to come home. She would keep her money a secret. She would stay in Hartford and find her father or be found by him. So she sat on the Liszaks' porch, trying to look helpless. She hugged herself, pressed her legs together against the chill morning, and shivered, and waited.

They walked home together, Mrs. Liszak's husband carrying grocery bags. He looked surprised to see Suzanne. Mrs. Liszak did not. She unlocked the door.

"The girl's freezing," he said, and he put down the bags. "Come inside, girl."

But Mrs. Liszak touched his shoulder, turned him away. "Take the groceries to the kitchen, Charlie," she said. "I'll worry about Suzanne."

Suzanne peeked up; her plan had called for pity in Mrs. Liszak's face but she saw only disdain. Mrs. Liszak said: "There's nothing for you here. Go away."

"Can't I—?"

But Mrs. Liszak had followed her husband and shut the door behind her.

Suzanne listened to the click of the deadbolt. Locked out of a house, locked into a life. That was it then. No Liszaks. No Eagle Scout. No Karen. No mother. No Daddy.

She doubled over, weeping. She noticed through tears the chipped polish of her toenails poking out from her clogs, saw a carpenter's nail stick up from a floor board, saw rust on the flat head of the nail. The nail's shaft was bent. Another nail beside it stayed driven into the dry, gray wood. She counted four nails per plank. She counted a dozen planks. Two dozen. So many nails. Nails everywhere. She felt grief everywhere. It filled the porch. She wept it large enough to flood the yard, the street; in comparison she grew into insignificance. She watched herself shrink, helpless. Her head reeled. She felt a peculiar peace.

She would know this strange calm again, but not for years, not until two serene hours trapped alone in a broken elevator during a week of art school exams. She would not understand this peculiar peace until she had lain in a sleeping bag in a New Hampshire mountain meadow, her fiance snoring and the Milky Way unraveling across the sky. Years after that, she would expect to feel it (and would) in the delivery room of a California hospital as she watched Karen bring forth a second son.

But now it made no sense, this thrill at her own impotence, her own triviality, not here on the Liszaks' porch, having gone too long without food, exhausted, vision blurred. Time stopped, too, and she stumbled in it, floated away from the porch, crashed into the cement walk. She felt grit in the skin of her forehead, and it didn't matter. In her mouth, she tasted blood—a tooth hung loose—and it didn't matter. The world turned upside down, then flipped back. Hands gripped her arms; hands lifted her. Someone spoke her name. Inside, the house was warm.