

SHEILA MURRAY

Going Home

“THIS IS WHAT HE INSISTS ON.” Daphne sweeps her arm toward an array of medicine bottles alongside a large jug of water and two glasses. “I keep telling him to make an effort and get out of bed. Spend the day downstairs. All he does is lie here and watch TV.” Her exasperation has reached its daily limit. She stands up sharply into her sigh, reaches for the bedside tray, piles the day’s accumulated debris on with a deliberate bang and clatter.

“It’s always so dark in here.” Pushing the tray into her daughter’s hands: “Hold this.” Daphne walks around the bed to the window and pulls the drapes back. It is overcast, but the light still shocks in the sickroom. John rolls over onto his side, face away from the window. It’s been three years since his daughter has seen him. Then he was soft, puffy and pale. Now he is thin, almost gaunt.

“Dad?”

He looks at her and says, as though she’d seen him just last weekend, “Nice to see you, dear. We miss you.”

This room, she thinks, was her bedroom. What is he doing in here? The same single bed—too soft, she’d always thought. She sleeps on a good queen-sized mattress now. He should open the window. The air in the room catches in her throat.

“Will you stay for a while, Lucy?” His voice is unchanged, clear and steady, but distant.

“He’s like a little kid,” says Daphne. “You could come in here and take away everything but the bed and TV, and he wouldn’t even notice.” She glances quickly at John. Lucy knows that she is holding back from saying the word she’d always overused: Pathetic.

“How long have you been in bed, Dad?” This, Lucy realizes, is the question she should have asked at the start. “How long has he been in bed?” The question she could have asked her mother at any time over the last year

when the sniping references to her father's indolence started. She'd told her mother, "He should take things a little easier now. He's retired. He has that back thing. Give him a break, Mom."

Before going downstairs, they stop to look at the changes in Daphne's bedroom. Her father's formal prints are gone, along with her mother's fussy pinks and blues. The bed is inviting, covered with a simple, crisp cream-coloured duvet. There are pink-and-white peonies in a bowl on the dresser. Lucy walks across the new carpet to the bedside table where a book of poetry and a large book on architecture sit beside a *Time* magazine. Lucy looks back at her mother. Daphne always read detective novels and homemaker magazines. Her mother's life has continued on. Without a daughter. Despite her husband's bedridden state. In fact, Lucy realizes with surprising clarity, she's thriving on it. The house is changed. It has almost become gracious

Daphne watches her daughter's interest with real pleasure, though a flush of anxiety has made her hot in her new spring-green cardigan. She's almost shy. Her grown daughter looks at her with genuine appreciation.



They share the same face, Lucy and Daphne. It happened sometime in Lucy's early thirties. People started to remark on the strength of the resemblance. "Wow, you look just like your Mom." Lucy thought this a profound and unfair exaggeration until she mistook her mother for herself in a photograph—smiling widely at the camera and squinting into the sun. For a moment Lucy couldn't remember where this picture of herself was taken. It was the blouse and pants that finally tipped her off. Lucy wore shirts and jeans.

Sometime after that, following an evening of nostalgia, lectures, evasions and deep hurt on both sides, Lucy stopped going home. For months she'd watched her mother. Checked off resemblances. Winced at shared expressions, gestures, body language. In the middle of listening for the thousandth time to her mother's A-list of disappointments, many of which featured some aspect of her daughter's behaviour, Lucy had found herself filled with gratitude for her own childless state (never to pass this bitterness on to another generation) and suddenly freed from obligations to future weekends at home.

That was more than three years ago. Now her father was sick, and her mother grown suddenly older, or so Aunt Debra said.

"Look sweetie," Debra had pleaded over the telephone, "I know you and your mom haven't got along in years, but you talk to her on the phone. Your Dad's sick." Lucy's silence prompted a change in tactics. "He's

getting older. We all are. Your Uncle Dave's passed on. We'll all be gone, and sooner than you think." Debra was sharp, "Do the right thing, Lucy. Don't let yourself down."

The family creed. Don't let me, him, her or yourself down. Uphold the standard. Lucy summed it up for her friends as "March or Die."



Daphne is planting geraniums. She's bought the medium-size black planters and placed them around her front door and at the foot of her front steps. Mark is adding plant food to the potting soil in the window boxes, teasing out root balls, gently pressing the plants into rich, damp soil. This morning he'd driven her to the garden centre, carried the heavy bags to the car. He is a great help to her, Daphne thinks.

"Please don't make trouble, Mark," Daphne says.

"I might not. But I probably will."

"Let her be. It's hard for her to come here. She's so proud. Like me." says Daphne.

"Look, Daph," says Mark. "I'll stay away if you like. I don't want to make things difficult for you. But I'm not going to forgive Lucy. She let us both down. You and me."

Daphne stands back from her work, puts her palm to the small of her back and stretches. She turned her full attention to Mark, "You're a good man." She means it.

"I try." He makes a self-deprecating grin.

"Yeah. Right," says Daphne. Then, with real sincerity, almost a plea. "I really want her to feel at home here," she says. "It's been too long. I was hard on her, too."

It's been more than three years since they confronted each other, glaring into each other's faces. (Daphne extremely proud to have a daughter so undoubtedly hers—painfully aware of Lucy's distress at being so like her mother.) This morning, early, before the day began, Daphne sat in her garden at the small white wrought-iron table with her robin's-egg-blue china cup, breathing the smells of lilac and new growth. There'd been a trace of mist at the bottom of the garden, already noisy with bird song. Daphne had prayed to God for something like acceptance. Lucy was her one accomplishment, gone out into the world and still standing.



Lucy has chosen a smart blue dress with a light buff-coloured cardigan. Her shoes are shiny brown pumps with low heels. She walks out of the subway station and heads for the taxi stand, then turns back and walks through the station to the other side, where the local Firkin pub has always been—conveniently located, west side, Halley Street, across from the subway, on the way to mother’s house. It’s still there.

Lucy settles into a chair by the window. Halley Street hasn’t changed. She’d bought cigarettes and Coke in the strip mall next door. The bus stop had been so cold in the winter when she’d left her winter coat at home in favour of a leather jacket, no hat, and ridiculously thin leather gloves. Cigarettes kept you warm, she and her friends agreed.

She has been fighting with her mother since she was fourteen. It has been twenty-six years of hard work. Lucy’s independence, physical and financial, is secure now. But she has never quite gained confidence. Her mother’s judgment, criticism, disappointment, have left her on shaky ground.

Lucy scans the row of backs at the bar. She doesn’t recognize anyone, hadn’t expected to. Fifteen years ago she’d have known them all. It was the Maple Leaf Tavern, then. A dirty, smoky, boozy haven. There’d been a dance floor, and a rock band on Saturday nights. The best night of the week.

She’d met Mark over a table full of draught beer on a winter weekend shortly before her eighteenth birthday, and married him seven months later on one of the bleakest days of the year. His parents gave them his grandmother’s house to live in. At the time she’d thought this an extraordinary act of generosity. Within a year she was telling friends that her life was unbearable. Mark was a rigid, cold, demanding old man at twenty-seven. The only thing they’d had in common was music and alcohol, and what she’d mistaken for a lively spirit was what happened after a few drinks. He maintained it for about an hour, then it rapidly deteriorated into a thin stream of verbal disapprovals, of herself, her friends, her aspirations.

Lucy and Mark had lasted five long years. The end was triggered by a miscarriage: Lucy’s appalled relief and Mark’s grief. He sorrowed for months and blamed the loss of his baby on his wife’s bad habits. Lucy looked for a way out. When she left, Mark said his life was finished and that he intended to wait out the rest of it in bitter disappointment. She understood from her mother that he had not wavered.



“She’s coming today. Your daughter. Remember her?” Daphne wants him to hear the irritation in her voice. John sits in the chair by the door,

wrapped in his robe. A tiny man. Getting smaller, Daphne thinks, by the month.

“Today?” says John.

“I’ve been telling you for a week.”

“I remembered.”

“Of course you didn’t.” Daphne moves quickly around the bed, tucking in sheets. Fluffing the pillows.

“You should get out of bed to eat. You know you can. Look at you now, sitting there. These sheets are ruined with food stains.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t make me into the wicked one, John. I look after you. You can’t deny that.

“I don’t.”

“You don’t give me anything back.

“I’m tired, Daphne.” John closes his eyes.



Daphne married at eighteen. John, who was twelve years older, had asked, and she’d been desperate to escape her mother’s suffocating rules. John promised her security and he kept his promise, staying at his job with the firm until an early retirement ten years ago. She’d had real respect for his ability to make money and maintain the house they had bought shortly after the marriage.

The baby girl came along at just the right time. Daphne was feeling stifled, lonely, an appendage to John’s life. After the false start of marriage she needed her own life to begin. A baby made them a family, and Daphne bore down with real determination. She learned to trust herself, rely on her own counsel. John led his life; she lived hers vigorously with Lucy. She became a neighborhood authority on child-rearing, duty-bound to share her hard-earned knowledge with new mothers.

Daphne knew some people resented her advice, saw her interest as intrusion. She was aware that her manner could be alienating. But there were very few people she wanted to know well. She found fault easily, with a keen instinct for weakness. She sometimes caught John looking at her as though she had grown another face. When she challenged him, he acquiesced.

On her forty-ninth birthday, John gave Daphne a holiday in London. Take a friend, he said. Flying frightened him, he said. What neither of them said, but both understood, was that it had been so long since they’d found it necessary to enjoy each other’s company that they were now afraid to try. She had looked for a companion, unsuccessfully, then gone anyway. And

discovered that she couldn't manage easily, looked vainly for John at each turn to ask necessary questions, follow directions, choose restaurants. She enjoyed the tours she took during the day, but the theatre evenings she'd anticipated were all booked. She braved dinner alone three times, but felt uncomfortably exposed.

She spent five evenings alone in a hotel room with the television, and one at a cinema that turned out to be an art house, playing a film she didn't understand. On a quiet afternoon in St. James' Park, seated on a bench, watching the ducks, she confessed to herself that all her past escape fantasies would have ended this way. She couldn't be alone.



When Lucy turns up the walk, pushing a skip into her step for show, Daphne is watching from the corner of the window, holding back the edge of the curtain. She's uncertain for the first time in months, though she's flanked by her permanent guard, troops in line: the furniture shining, rugs vacuumed, fresh-baked goods in the kitchen. The flowers that fill the window boxes are the season's fashion shade. Daphne is wearing a new skirt and a green cardigan from Banana Republic. She'd pictured Lucy in it as she stood in front of the changing-room mirror. This is Daphne's new style, younger, less conservative. She is determined not to fight. No criticisms, no questions—if that's what it takes. There is a secret that Daphne will keep to herself.

Upstairs in the house, John is sleeping. She'd looked in on him before coming downstairs. The room was stifling, too warm, stuffy. He liked the drapes closed during the day, claimed the light bothered his eyes. She'd picked up last night's mug and carried it downstairs with her. He didn't exist for her much, outside of his room, she realized. Beyond her obligation to his care. She didn't need him anymore.

Lucy, she knows, is standing on the front step, waiting for her mother to let her in. She'd have seen the briefest wraith at the edge of the window, an uneven crease of curtain. Daphne swallows her sudden anxiety and pulls open the front door. Her palms are damp when she puts her arms around Lucy's shoulders, pulling her close. She hesitates at Lucy's rigidity, her unbending spine. When she looks up there are tears in her daughter's eyes. "Well, you're here." Daphne is brusque. She drops her arms to rescue her daughter's embarrassment.

Lucy steps back sharply from her mother's sudden withdrawal. "Hi, Mom." In a moment she is filled with a child's hurt, all her resolve come undone. She is ten years old again. Stepping into the hallway with the um-

rella stand in the same place it has always been, she's overwhelmed with a threatening claustrophobia.

"I'm dying to see the changes you've made in the kitchen, Mom." She takes a deep breath. "I smell baking. Yummy." And heads straight to the back of the house where the glass patio doors let sunshine fill the room. In the kitchen there is time to register that her mother looks extremely well. A fit fifty-seven, youthful in a breast-hugging cardigan and a new lipstick colour. Lucy's a little hurt by this. Her mother should be properly old. With a shock, she understands that she needs to find a new perspective. She is thirty-eight. She and her mother are both adult women. They both have futures.

Daphne offers coffee in robin's-egg-blue china. "These are new, Mom."

"I got them to match the new cabinets. See the blue motif? What do you think?"

"Really nice. You did a great job." Lucy stands again surveying the whole room. Really nice, she has to concede. When her mother had talked her through the renovations over the telephone, she'd pictured lots of stifling and unnecessary detailing, her mother's usual overdone decorating. But this was tasteful. "Did Dad help choose this?" she asks. "I can't remember."

"No. He doesn't get involved. You know that. He can't be bothered."



From upstairs, John wonders at his daughter's return. He suspects she's come to see him. He'd been shocked to hear that it has been three years. His relationship with her had always been easier than hers with her mom. He'd always enjoyed their Sunday telephone conversations over the last years. He turns on his side. Rubs his left hip. They've fought so hard, those two. He's proud of Lucy's hard-won independence. Knows how closed Daphne's world has been. If they'd helped each other a little. He closes his fingers into fists, tight, then tighter. I am a sick man, he thinks. At the end of my life. With an adult daughter come to help look after me.



Within a few weeks, the trip into suburbia has become an already-familiar journey. From Lucy's downtown subway stop to the cavernous concrete bunkers of the suburban station. Then a noisy and bumpy bus ride along wide roads lined with strip malls and gas stations. In her bag, Lucy

has sheaves of paper carefully stapled. A preliminary map of her father's condition. Hours' worth of Internet downloads sorted and categorized, an argument he should find hard to dismiss. She has stayed away too long, she tells her friends. The beginning of his problem, she explains, is her mother's neglect, though she agrees with Daphne that he has dropped out, stopped caring. His physical problems are his excuse, but they don't justify his stay in bed. He needs antidepressants and lots of motivating. This is a surprise visit, to catch him off-guard and present her case. And besides she needs to buy shoes and the best shop is in the mall.

Lucy pushes through the front door with bags of shopping. After three years' absence, the mall is a treat. She doesn't get to them much anymore. Not living downtown.

The sound of singing comes from the kitchen. Two voices, her mom's, for sure. Not her dad's? Nobody ever sang in this house, not since she was about seven. There wasn't even music. There's a stereo she took up to her room as a teenager. It's stayed there. Her mother listens to talk radio. She doesn't remember her mother singing ever. She drops the bags where she's standing and walks lightly along the hall.

“So let them say your hair's too long
Cause I don't care, with you I can't go wrong
Then put your little hand in mine
There ain't no hill or mountain we can't climb”

The song is ridiculous coming from Daphne. Lucy smiles: my mom's gone mad. They sound nice together, though. She steps into the kitchen. Their backs are to her, faces front to the view through the patio doors. There are two bottles of wine on the kitchen counter. One of them is empty. Daphne's singing turns to laughter while he hums a couple more bars alone in a baritone voice. There is something familiar about him. Lucy is having trouble keeping this scene within the context of her parents' house.

He turns his head to Daphne, repeating the refrain, “Babe. I got you babe,” encouraging her back into the song. Daphne tosses her head back, pushing a hand through her hair with a giggle easy as a girl's. Their heads are unnaturally close together, what flashes between them is the light reflected from the diamond in his earring. Lucy steps forward. And stops short when he turns his head to look at her.

“Mark. Oh my God.”

“Lucy.” He's looking her up and down. Completely unsurprised. Daphne's chair scrapes the floor as she stands up with some haste.

“Lucy. What a surprise. Come on in. Can I get you some pie? We’ve been baking.” Lucy sees now that there are also two pies on the kitchen counter.

“Key lime, Lucy,” says Mark. “Your favourite.” The blue details on the kitchen cabinets complement the blue of Daphne’s t-shirt. She looks younger still, a flush from the wine across her cheeks, smile checked just behind the determined expression she’s rapidly assembling, thin lips pressed together, a girlish scowl between her eyes.

“Mom, what’s going on?”

“Have a glass of wine, Lucy.” Mark is already pouring a new glass for her.

“No,” she hesitates. “Oh. Okay. Yes.” Mark hands her the glass as each of them takes up a combative stance. Mark, with his own glass refilled to the top, leans belligerently against the sink. Daphne, who has refused more wine, stands, arms folded, before the patio doors and the backdrop of the garden. Lucy has put her glass down on the table, now determined to stay sober through this. She is gripping the back of a chair, glaring at both of them.

Mark swallows a mouthful of wine. “Lighten up, Lucy.”

“Dad’s upstairs in bed and the two of you are down here drinking and singing pathetic songs and—” she spits the rest, “and flirting with each other.”

“He’s seventy. He’s sick.” Lucy’s voice is cracking.

“We like each other,” Mark says. “Not your style, really, is it? Being liked, or being nice to people.” Mark is wearing a white shirt, open at the neck. His dark hair is still thick; he looks younger than forty-five. He manages to keep his sneer as he takes another swallow of wine.

“Your mom and I, we’ve been friends since you left. Daphne always kept in touch, didn’t you, girl?” He sways ever so slightly. “She always sent Christmas cards, remembered my birthday.”

“I felt sorry for him, Lucy. You hurt him badly.”

“Don’t do this to me, Mom.”

“Always about you, Lucy, hey?” Mark sits down heavily on one of the kitchen chairs. Lucy’s leaning forward so severely that her legs are beginning to ache, her knees are shaky. She sits, too. They face each other across the table, a wine bottle between them.

Daphne marches to the counter and pulls the pie toward her, searching noisily in a drawer for a knife. Then she reaches up to her cupboards for dessert plates. Her legs are long and her bottom is curved and toned under the soft fabric of her skirt. Lucy watches Mark’s appreciative gaze as her stomach twists in protest. “Oh my God,” she says, under her breath.

Daphne supplies each of them with a plate and fork. She stands again to find paper napkins, putting the pile in front of them on the table.

"I'll take a piece up to your dad with his tea." She's perfectly composed now. Lucy remembers Sunday dinners here. She and Mark and Mom and Dad, in what, up until now, had been a mostly forgotten and distant past.

"How's your life turned out, Lucy?" Mark jams a fork into his pie. "No happy marriages. No children. What is it you do? Office secretary?"

"Don't be so hard on her, Mark. She was always too independent for you."

"Too selfish," Mark says.

"Oh, for Christ's sake." Lucy stands up from the table and heads upstairs to the bathroom.

Her stomach is churning as she splashes cold water onto her face. "Oh my God," she whispers to herself. Sits on the toilet with her head hung down, calculating the importunity of her nausea. She waits for the heat prickling across her forehead to cool.

Down the hallway, propped up on pillows in his daughter's bedroom—where a framed picture of wild horses still hangs centered on the cream-coloured wall, and a small selection of stuffed toys watches vigilantly from the vantage of a wooden bureau—John considers the effort it will cost him to climb from the bed, dress in his robe and slippers, negotiate the stairs and fetch his own piece of pie from the kitchen. He decides against it, and fumbles for the television remote instead. It is beneath the duvet, tangled in a corner of his sheet. It usually is. He is quite addicted to reality shows. Another unexpected development in his life.

This is all the contemplation he allows himself. A brief moment of surprise to register the degree to which fate seems to have taken him over, a brief instant he immediately gives up to the closest distraction. Most often the television.

He pauses for a moment, listening to the water slowly filling the toilet tank and Lucy's slow progress back down the stairs.



The red Buick picks up speed as the light turns amber. Lucy sits beside Mark, her face drawn into a tight mask, staring front, as he races through the intersection, braking sharply to reduce his speed on the other side. Lucy, weighed down with baked goods from her mother's oven, has accepted a ride to the subway. And, even though she hates the bus, it is curiosity that

has ruled her decision. She tells herself she's like a child, playing with a sore tooth to see if it still hurts

"This is a mistake," she says. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this."

"Give it up, Lucy. Relax." He reaches for the volume dial on his radio and turns it up a couple of notches. Lucy sits stiff, as angry with herself as with Mark. The car rocks gently to the hard beat of REM's "Queen." Mark grins, Lucy scowls. Ahead of them, a man standing beside a pickup truck waves a greeting to Mark, who rolls down his window and pulls the car up beside him. "Hey, man."

"Hey, Mark. Daphne. Where're you guys going?" Lucy stops breathing. Not because she's been mistaken for her mother, that's happened before. But because this man expects to see Daphne with Mark. Sensing the explosive quality of Lucy's silence, Mark chooses not to enlighten his friend.

"Going to pick something up at my place, man. See ya." He moves the car on, turning finally into the driveway. The tall pine tree is still in front of the house. A wide front yard, nearly fifty feet. This street once sat at the edge of town, comfortable enough, middle-income homes for people with average expectations. Now those who've stayed are land rich. These are huge properties in the context of the sprawling suburban mazes that surround them.

Climbing from the car, Lucy considers simply walking away. Back down the driveway, out to the main street, boarding a bus to anywhere but here. Instead she follows Mark. There are geraniums, in the same colour palette as her mother's, ranged in tidy pots down the sides of the front steps. This time Lucy isn't surprised.

The house is a split-level, a simple bungalow from the front that expands to include a large family room and two extra bedrooms on the hidden downstairs level. It's too big for one person. He should have moved on. "Have you lived here alone the whole time?" She allows curiosity to override her avoidance of any intimacy with Mark.

"I had a girlfriend here for a couple of years."

"Oh yeah?" Lucy waits for more, but Mark has his back to her.

"Look at this, Lucy. Remember this room, with the old green wallpaper and crap carpet?" The room is transformed. A luminous set from Canadian Interiors. Sleek furniture in neutral colours with an occasional dramatic splash of colour, a series of red cushions, a pink wall above the fireplace, a floor lamp with a fluted glass shade. There are two large paintings on the walls, big abstracted landscapes. The floor is covered in a lovely soft wood that glows the colour of molasses. For the second time that day, Lucy finds it hard to breathe.

“When did you do this?”

“Over the last three years. Do you like it?” He is rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, his gloating barely contained by a triumphant smile.

“I didn’t know you liked this kind of thing. Design. And paintings?”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me. You never bothered to find out.”

“Did you have a designer do this?”

“Yes, of course. That’s the only way to go with this stuff. She’s good, isn’t she?” Lucy follows behind into the kitchen that has become a white-tiled showpiece with maple cabinetry. Mark has opened a tall side cabinet, a wine rack nestled inside its own climate-controlled environment behind a sleek maple door. He pours two glasses. “It’s the upside of not having kids, eh? Disposable income. I make good money. I spend it.”

Lucy thinks briefly of her rented apartment in downtown Toronto. The top floor of a big house that has an angel brick front, and curlicue iron work. She has IKEA furniture and thick piles of decorating and design magazines. Lucy uses colour on her apartment walls, too. Not with the same effect. The most impressive part of her house is the patch of garden she shares with her downstairs neighbour—who is a real gardener. It is full of texture and colour all year round.

It never occurred to her, she almost says, throughout the entire five years that she lived here, that this house could ever become desirable.

“It’s what you want, isn’t it?” His voice made deep with boasting. “You did all those interior design courses? Daphne always said you’d never make it.”

Lucy walks back to the living room carrying a balloon-shaped glass of red wine. She sits appreciatively on the sofa, absently stroking the soft, stone-colored fabric. She is still searching for the missing piece, the part that explains how she’d missed this potential. With some relief she remembers: she was eighteen when she married him and twenty-three when she left. That he’d had a promising career with a blue-chip firm had only made him duller. She watches him gloat and knows that he hasn’t changed much. But wonders if she has.



John has opened the curtains. This is the only time of day in which he finds pleasure. He has been watching *Vets*, a disappointment, a repeat. He’s pushed the mute button to listen for the starlings that fill the sky in

their swirling hundreds before roosting in the ravine behind the house. The room faces west, and tonight's sunset is a wide red river behind a silhouette of leaves.

His door is open a few inches and what he hears comes from the far end of the house, travels the length of the plush cream carpet, slides through the open door and into his room. Daphne's giggle. And something sharp from Mark. They are in her bedroom. He tells himself to turn the sound back on, but doesn't. Instead he listens to the long silences, the thump as something hits the floor. Another stifled giggle. A gasp.

He's listened before. It is as though his wife's affair were a television segment, an episodic reality show. He is engaged with the event as it happens, utterly detached once it is finished. He doesn't think about it between occurrences and that is why it always takes him by surprise. He hasn't seen Mark in nearly six months, though he hears him.

At the front of the house, in a borrowed car, Lucy has watched the starlings fill the sky then disappear behind the house. When she was eight, she'd imagined that the evening sky above her suburb had become an African one, thick with screaming birds. That the red sun she saw from her bedroom window lit the tawny backs of lions, roving, sinister, through the ravine behind her house.

Blocks away, on Sheppard Avenue, the windows of the office buildings that shone gold in the sunset have turned black. She has been parked for two hours. The radio is tuned to an oldies station, and the crumbled remains of a large bag of nachos lie beside her on the passenger seat. She listens to Tracy Chapman sing "Fast Car." Sings quietly along in agreement.

Her plan, when she'd left her house this evening, was to confront Daphne with the obvious question. "Was she, or was she not, having a sexual relationship with Mark?" The darkened house and Mark's red Buick in the driveway stopped her. She'd walked around the house to the back, squeezing through the rarely-used and very squeaky gate, and seen the soft glow behind the closed blinds in her mother's bedroom. And from her own old room where her Dad now stayed, the harsh, rapidly changing light from the television screen. His curtains were open.

Back in the car, Lucy is filled with a breathless sense of having arrived at a critical juncture. She needs, she tells herself—as she watches by turn the darkened front windows of the house and the red dashboard lights—to make decisions. He's sick, for God's sake. Bedridden. He's seventy years old. How can you do this to him?



On an unseasonably warm evening in early summer, an hour before the sun sets, two women who share the same face make some changes. Lucy has boxes piled to the roof in her rented hatchback. Daphne folds laundry in the kitchen. Shake and fold and smooth. She builds a tidy pile, begins another. Shake and fold and smooth. She watches her hands manage the clothes and tries to think about only that. Lucy, at the kitchen sink, runs the tap with a finger held beneath it until the water is icy cold, then fills her mug. Lucy drinks, in one long draught, and bangs her mug back down on the counter. She's stayed away for three years. Now, as if thrown from a dice cup, she finds herself standing in her mother's kitchen: Daphne silenced and diminished. But she has a vision of her mother, snuck from the house to see her boyfriend, caught short by her daughter on her return.

Upstairs, in the back of the house, John listens to Lucy's slow, heavy climb up the stairs. Hears the thud of the boxes as they drop to the floor. Then her proprietary run back down. His television is on, but muted. From the kitchen come the women's voices pitched unnaturally high. He pictures their standoff at opposite sides of the kitchen. Both faces fatigued and determined. He is hungry for something sweet and dense. Creamy. John wonders how long it will be before things are back to normal. He longs for cakes and pies.