

THINGS FALLING

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MOTHER KNOWS SKYLAB will land on our car. We're driving West on 80 to Iowa City, where we'll spend two days, then return. She sits on the passenger side, rustling through this morning's Des Moines paper. "Look. Do you know what the odds are? Three billion to one. Why would it hit us?"

I nod, emphasizing my point. Her expression is one usually reserved for foreigners, small children, or the mildly retarded. "Why not?" she replies.

Since we've stumbled out of science and into philosophy, I don't argue. Philosophy, for my mother and me, is dangerous territory. Instead I roll my neck back and around, trying to ease the strain.

"Stop that."

"Stop what?" I ask.

"What you're doing with your head. You look spastic."

"So? Who cares?"

"The people in the car that just passed us, that's who. They looked over at you and speeded up."

"Heaven forbid."

We drive in silence, surrounded by rolling hills. The highway eases up and down, up and down, as though breathing. Then I ask:

"Are we safe yet?"

"Safe?" Her mouth tightens into a thin smile which quivers at the ends.

"From Skylab, Mom. Has it passed over Iowa? Does the paper say?"

She looks out the windows and harumphs.

"Don't be silly," she says.

She thinks I'm mocking her. It's shaky business, confined together to the interior of a Chrysler for eight hours. On the seat between us, cellophane sparkles: Benson and Hedges on her side, Camel Lights on mine.

"Anyway," I say, "Today it's just circling. Doesn't fall till tomorrow. Or the next day."

"Forget it."

The sky yellows around us. What glows beside me is my mother's cigarette. Her hand, reaching for the ashtray, is shaking.

“Look,” she says.

She points to a hill, on top the silhouette of a single tree. Its branches are dark, thin fingers against the sky.

“You should be a photographer,” I say. “You have a good eye.”

I hear her suck breath, drag on the cigarette.

“But I’m not a photographer,” she says. “Am I.”

Mine is not one of those mothers who opened a gift shop or entered law school when the last child left home. I’m the second of two and left ten years ago; still, she’s at home. When I think of her there I think of dusk, imagine her walking from room to room in the large, dim house, waiting for the lights in the neighborhood to come on, for my father to come home for dinner. Beyond that, she waits for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

It’s why I asked her to join me, on this trip. I’m looking for an apartment; in the fall, I’ll begin graduate school. I liked the vision of our sharing a front seat, skimming over the highway, crossing state lines. It seemed a generous idea, at the time.

Mother insists on the Holiday Inn because she knows what to expect. At Iowa City we check in, unpack, and head for the restaurant. While waiting for the hostess, I stand behind Mother. Though we’re the same height, she seems taller; she leads with her chin. People look up at her as we pass, curious and humored. Perhaps the chin is too high, out of fashion; perhaps a walk to a table at the Holiday Inn is not what it once was.

After ordering, Mother lights a cigarette, sips sherry, and says:

“So. How are things?”

Things. She hesitates a moment before saying it, then plunges in, so that the word sounds loaded and awkward. It’s a word she began using when it dawned on us both that what she wanted to know about my life was the generalities, not the specifics.

“Fine. Things are fine.”

She smiles. I smile back. We finger cigarettes, munch caraway rolls, and when the food arrives we’re overly impressed; at the moment, it’s all we have in common.

Mother picks up her fork.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she says.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re making a diagnosis.”

“No, I wasn’t, I was just wondering. Have you thought about hobbies?”

Her eyes widen, she says:

“Good Lord.”

“Sorry. Bad idea.”

When dessert’s over, we glance at each other. Then I realize she’s not looking at me, but over my shoulder.

“Something is wrong with that woman.”

I look around. A well-dressed fiftyish woman sits at a table behind me, alone, leaning her head on her hands.

“How do you know?” I ask.

“She didn’t go to the salad bar. See? Her husband and the other couple went. But she didn’t.”

“Maybe she doesn’t like salad.”

Mother shakes her head.

“No. He’s filling an extra bowl for her.”

Mother’s forehead wrinkles, she’s silent for a moment, then says:

“It might be her marriage. No, that’s too easy.”

“I know the problem.”

“What?”

“She’s paralyzed. From the neck down.”

“Cut it out,” Mother says, “That’s sick.”

“Sorry. But I’ll tell you one thing. You should be a writer, you like to tell stories.”

“Ha, ha,” Mother says. “Very funny.”

In the morning, my mother stands in a dim corner of an apartment. She’s looking down, at the carpet, which is green and suspiciously stained. The room is the size of a generous closet. Cakes of dirt perch on ridges of woodwork. The curtains burst with large aqua flowers. I imagine myself living here, mistaking the window for a shower and stepping out, naked, into the air over the backyard. The landlord wears plaid Bermuda shorts, tennis shoes and dark socks. He’s barely taller than the dresser. I consider that his body and this apartment may be part of a master plan in which I, 5’9” in stocking feet, will never belong. Right now he’s telling me that graduate students need to learn to live in small spaces. I don’t ask why; this is the fourth place we’ve seen this morning.

He opens the refrigerator, and ignores the odor of old eggs which wafts out. From the corner I hear a low, staccato noise.

“Hmmp. . .hmmp.”

We both turn. Mother is on her knees. She appears to be finding things in the carpet. Her hand dives into the shag rug and comes out holding something, which she squishes between her fingers. I think of a word I haven’t heard since grade school: cooties. I believe she’s looking for cooties. With each retrieval she makes the noise, providing a syncopated bass accompaniment to the room.

“Hmmp. . .hmmp.”

I explain to the landlord that I had something less cozy in mind.

In the car, I turn toward her.

“Is it absolutely necessary to grunt?”

“It was a dump.”

"Of course it was a dump. Do you think that escaped me? Do you think I'd live in a place with shower curtains over the windows?"

She looks at me, squinting.

"I don't know."

"Lord. Anyway, you've been doing it all morning, not just there."

"Well. It's not like I said anything."

"You don't have to say anything when you sit in a corner and grunt. The point comes across. Like when I drive, you hiss."

Her eyes widen.

"I do not."

"Yes you do. When someone in front slows down you go ssssss—like air leaking out of a tire. Look, say anything, but don't make noises like that."

She turns her head.

"Well."

At the next address I get out and stand next to the car. Her door doesn't open, so I tap on the window.

"Come on."

She looks straight ahead.

"I'll stay here. I just get in the way."

I sigh.

"Suit yourself."

This apartment is the best yet. The hardwood floors shine. Porcelain feet protrude from beneath the bathtub. The rooms are spacious, and the rent's reasonable. The landlady awaits my decision. I look at one side of the room, then another, and as I turn I suddenly see my future, an endless series of mute and perfect corners.

In the car Mother asks:

"Nice?"

"Wonderful."

"Did you take it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Let's eat."

At lunch we pick in silence and ask polite questions. Silverware clinks and rattles like small weapons. Mother twists her head, looking out the window. In the cold midday light I notice that the skin on her neck is sagging. After each twist it sags more, as though every small movement renders some part of her more stretched out. *Mother*, I want to say, your *neck* is sagging, as though it's a petticoat which can be hitched up with safety pins. She always had safety pins. And needle and thread. Instead I say:

"What about the salad lady?"

Mother looks at me, surprised.

“What do you think happened?” I ask.

“Oh. She’s just a tired housewife from Des Moines who can’t decide between Roquefort and Thousand Island.”

“No,” I shake my head, “She’s got something up her sleeve. She’s ready for a comeback.”

“Yes?” Mother brightens.

“Sure. Her husband doesn’t know but she’s been taking dance lessons at the Y. Belly Dance.”

Mother smiles and I see I’m forgiven. I continue:

“And now she’s been offered a job in a club frequented by Greek men. They like their women mature.”

“Who doesn’t?”

We laugh, and the story begins to take shape in the fragile space between shafts of smoke and sunlight.

I sit on the edge of the bed, adjusting channels, until the picture clears. On the screen a green man stands in front of a chalkboard, drawing a long, extended arc which ends at a group of wavy lines labeled Pacific Ocean. He says Skylab passed over Iowa at 3:17 and is expected to land tomorrow. I yell:

“Hey. We’re safe for another day.”

The only response is the hum of the shower. I turn off the set, lean back in bed. It’s been a good afternoon. We returned to the apartment with the hardwood floors and I rented it; others were interested, the landlady said, but she chose me because I brought my mother along. Mother beamed all the way back to the hotel. We’re resting now, before dinner.

The water stops; I hear the padding of feet. The door opens and she whooshes out in a blue silk robe.

From the bathroom drifts a sweet, steamy smell: Camay soap and perfume. It’s what always follows my mother out of rooms, what lingers in the tub when she’s finished. I close my eyes and see the Sunday evenings when I was six and seven, when we bathed together. First Mother locked the bathroom door, then she turned on the water full blast. She poured crystals into the tub. They swirled and foamed, until we were the final ingredients in a huge, steaming pudding. We squeezed washcloths over our heads; warm water dribbled down the backs of our ears. Though it was crowded in the tub, a third party joined us—sometimes she was pink and sometimes yellow, but always we called her Miss Cammy. She was the girl who looked up at us from cakes of soap. Though Miss Cammy was the picture of calm, Mother assured me her life was not without trials; in fact, her problems were just like mine, but she was always a step ahead. Miss Cammy wasn’t wild about starting first grade, Mother said, but she kept her chin up, and though Miss Cammy was afraid of the dark, she could sleep with a Tinkerbell nightlight. I could listen for hours, but when the tips of our fingers wrinkled we stood

up, wrapping ourselves in warm, soft towels. The steam was so thick we were ghosts in the mirror. Mother dabbed perfume on her neck, then on mine; she opened the door, calling me to follow. But I didn't. Instead I closed the door behind her and sat on the edge of the tub. I didn't want that sweet, steamy smell to escape, to diffuse through the house, and I lingered in it.

Now, Mother lies down on the other bed.

"I'm taking a nap."

Soon I hear her breathing even out. I lie on my back, looking up, imagine Skylab in its orbit. Perhaps, on the roof of our room is a big red X. X marks the spot. Perhaps Skylab's electronic eye will spot it and zoom toward us—I'm pleased to think of Skylab coming to rest at a Holiday Inn. But of course it won't happen. I'm safe; the odds are against it. And I'm lying in a room where the small, even breaths of my mother drift from the next bed, and an old, soft, sweet-smelling towel wraps around me.

After dinner, in the cocktail lounge, we're both comfortable. Perhaps darkness is the answer; the difference in clothing, make-up, externals are no longer obvious. What I see across the table is a familiar outline, the same slope of shoulders, tilt of head. I see now the conflicts were only a matter of style.

The waitress brings our third round. We toast.

Mother's face is flushed, her eyes flash. She looks passionate, a woman with secrets. Tell me, I want to say, tell me the things I don't know about you that will make it all add up.

She sips wine, leans toward me.

"Do you know when I was last at a motel without your father?"

She's smiling, girlish. Her tone is conspiratorial; I'm flattered. For a moment we're adolescents, starting a club. She can be President, I'll be Secretary-Treasurer; we won't let anyone else join.

"You can tell me," I whisper, winking, "I won't tell Dad."

She sits back, laughs.

"For God's sake, I didn't mean—I just meant it's been a long time."

"Ah," I grin, "Maybe you'll like it so much you'll become a traveling salesman. Saleswoman. You could sell draperies, cosmetics, whatever."

I lift my glass to toast this charming idea. But she doesn't join me. Instead she runs a finger around the top of her glass, as though following some inevitable track. I'm briefly panicked when she pushes her chair back, moving away from me, so I say:

"Hey. Your friend isn't here."

"Friend?"

"You know, the salad lady. And I'll tell you why. She took the job. Dancing. She's on the way to Baltimore."

Mother frowns.

“Baltimore?”

“You have to start somewhere. It’s a new life. Tomorrow she’ll buy two wigs, both blonde.”

Mother laughs, joins in. We’re extravagant, follow the salad lady to Baltimore, through her affair with a Brazilian ambassador, an appearance on “Hollywood Squares.” The waitress brings the fifth round just as the salad lady has been invited to the Vatican.

We toast for the fifth time. Mother takes a sip, then leans forward, holding her head on her hands.

“God. I’m plastered.”

As though I didn’t hear she sits up, assumes an air of propriety. Shoulders back, she inquires after my well-being. She’s every inch a mother now, as though the role itself will save her, will keep her back straight and her head high. But it doesn’t work. Soon her mouth sags, she nods her head. Then she gives up, leans down on the table.

“Let’s go.”

We stand slowly, take tiny steps down the hallway. Mother leans against me, my arm around her shoulders. As we open the door to the room, she says:

“Do you know what else happens?”

“About what?”

“The salad lady.”

“No, what happens?” I say, helping her onto the bed.

“She dies.”

“What?”

“She dies.”

I smooth out the wrinkles in her skirt, then sit in a chair next to the bed.

“That’s a lousy ending. She wasn’t sick. Or old. Why does she die?”

Mother looks earnest; her forehead wrinkles. She’s trying to figure it out, and says:

“I don’t know. Why not? God, help me to the bathroom.”

We reach the toilet just in time. She holds onto the sink, with the other hand waves me out of the room. I close the door behind me. The noise is lonely and guttural. I hear the toilet flush, she opens the door. I help her to bed.

Mother says:

“It’s not so bad. About her dying. Her husband remarries in a month or two, the kids are grown, they take care of themselves. It’s no tragedy.”

“Be quiet now. Go to sleep.”

I stroke her hair until she turns away, snoring softly. Then I change into my nightgown in the dark, and go to the bathroom to wash. I leave the door open, because of the smell. It’s a sick smell, harsh and sour.

The next day, on the way home, I turn on the radio. The newscaster

announces that Skylab just splashed down, off the coast of Australia. No fatalities. Just a blazing streak of light.

“There you go,” I say to Mother.

She smiles, reaching for a cigarette. Her hand is shaking. The road breathes beneath us. I look straight ahead, thinking how Skylab missed us after all, but I’ll never be safe again.