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# Falling Off the Roof

Nina R. Mishkin

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## *Falling Off the Roof*

Back then, you knew, even when you were very little, what you were going to do when you grew up. In the 1930s, only daddies went out to work in the morning; the mommies all stayed home and kept house. A woman went to business, said my mother, only when there was no one else to put bread on the table. Later, the movies to which she took me almost every Saturday evening confirmed this fact of life: after the heroine and hero met “cute” and experienced a series of silly misunderstandings, all was eventually resolved by a proposal, after which the credits rolled to a surge of triumphant music, and that was the end.

There were also the stories that appeared, three per issue, in the ladies’ magazines she bought at the corner newsstand every month and I devoured before she had time to sit down and enjoy them. Sometimes the heroine was deeply in love with a foolish man distracted by a flirtatious and superficially glamorous competitor until he came to recognize the enduring worth of the heroine’s goodness, virtue, and purity. In other stories, another sort of heroine, with an overabundance of suitors, had to learn during the course of the narrative how to differentiate between Mr. Right and Mr. Wrong. (Mr. Right was the one who loved small animals and children, just like she did.) But it all came to the same thing in the end: Will you marry me? Oh yes darling yes. I could polish off all three stories before dinnertime.

These magazines also contained columns of advice, reinforcing the lessons set forth in the fiction, that I consumed with equal avidity. Here I learned that once you managed to attract and secure a husband, you must never take him for granted. Serving delicious meals and making your home a pleasure to return to was not enough, unless you also took great care not to “let yourself go,” even if that meant rising very early every morning to apply make-up and fix your hair before he woke up. At the front of *The Ladies’ Home Journal* was an additional, cautionary feature I particularly enjoyed. It was called “Can This Marriage Be Saved?” and presented each month a real husband and a real wife, who took turns telling why their marriage was in serious trouble. The wise columnist then offered an insightful analysis of how each could defer somewhat to the other and thereby enable the marriage to continue. It did not escape me, even at the age of eleven, that

almost without exception it was the wife who seemed to have selfishly demanded too much, without sufficiently recognizing the weight of the burdens already shouldered by her husband, and who therefore had to do most of the deferring.

When I reached seventh grade in September 1942, the Board of Education of the City of New York itself placed an official imprimatur on my assumptions about my future. For two periods a week, while boys took shop and gym, we girls were instructed in the arts of home-making and sewing, so that we could learn, our homemaking teacher told us, how to be wives. I did not shine in these two classes and therefore actively disliked them. However, it never occurred to me to question the role to which gender had assigned me. I was quite sure that once I was grown up, all would occur as in the movies and the stories, and also as in my mother's two marriage manuals, which I discovered in her bedroom just after my eleventh birthday and which (a modern mother!) she let me read. There I sat after school on the boudoir chair in my parents' bedroom, trembling over the pages of *Sane Sex Life and Sane Sex Living* and trying to imagine the unparalleled joy I would experience as a virgin bride being deflowered by my tender, loving, and apparently experienced new husband—how he would nuzzle this, touch that, arouse with patience and murmured endearments, and finally conquer me with one manly thrust that would hardly hurt at all, so greatly would I desire to welcome and enfold him. My little-girl nipples stiffened at the thought of it.

Despite my interest in what the authors of the books called “conjugal love,” I could not believe that my mother and father still engaged in this activity. For one thing, at thirty-nine and forty-one, they were probably too old. Besides, they seemed to live quite separate lives, which presented them with very little opportunity for “doing it.” True, they did always sleep together in a double bed. But it was a togetherness that seemed to me sporadic and uninteresting at best—such as when my mother served my father breakfast in our tiny kitchen, or when he ate Sunday dinner with us, or when they discussed family finances or spoke on infrequent occasions about what might have happened to their relatives in what they continued to refer to as “Russia,” none of whom had been heard from since the Kirov purges in 1937. My mother also washed and ironed for my father, no small task. A heavy perspirer, he used to go through at least two shirts, two handkerchiefs, two pairs of socks, and two sets of boxer shorts and sleeveless undershirts a day—one set in the morning, and another when he went to work around three thirty in the afternoon. In the summer, he

sometimes took a third set of everything with him in a briefcase, so that he could change during what he called “the break.”

As a musician, he worked late afternoons and evenings, but he was also away in the mornings, for reasons of “business”—usually at the hotel where he played cocktail and dinner music or at the musicians’ union, where he could “hear what was happening.” Except on Sundays, he was therefore home only between two and three in the afternoon, during which time my mother served him a meal and he showered and changed for work. He returned by subway around midnight, at which late hour I thought it unlikely that he would have much energy for murmuring and soothing, kissing and touching.

Certainly not soothing, kissing, and touching my mother, who was not following the advice of the magazines she bought. Although she had not let herself get fat, she tended to save her good clothes for special occasions, which came rarely if at all, and had got into the habit of slopping around the house in a housedress, under which one did not have to wear a girdle or stockings, and with which she wore no make-up. According to all the authorities available to me, my mother, as much as I loved her, was thus no longer an object of desire. Instead, she had become a person whose life consisted mainly of dusting, vacuuming, marketing, and cooking three thrifty and nutritious meals every day. This must be quite boring, I thought, when I thought of it, which wasn’t often. After all, I had plenty of time before I’d grow up. Except for homemaking and sewing, I was happy.

Just before the first day of high school, the toilet paper came away red. I knew what it was right away. A few years before, a girl living next door had told me that when I was older, I would bleed from between my legs every month. She called it “the curse,” and her older sister called it “falling off the roof.” This made no sense to me until my mother explained about the monthly egg and the lining of the place inside where babies grew that had to be discarded every month. *She* called it by its scientific name: “menstruation.” However, this menstruation or curse or whatever it was wouldn’t happen until some time in the future. So it was with initial disbelief that I looked down at the wad of toilet paper in my hand. I wiped again. More red. No question. The urgency in my voice brought my mother to the bathroom at once.

“Stay there,” she commanded. “Don’t get up. Don’t sit anywhere else till I get back.” Stranded on the toilet behind the closed bathroom door with my underpants down around my socks, I heard her hurry to our front closet. Then there was the sound of our apartment door

slamming, the key in the lock, the elevator arriving at our floor, and I knew she was off to the corner drugstore.

She was back quite soon, bearing a brown paper bag from which she extracted, with an expression of great seriousness, an elastic belt and a box proclaiming that it contained Modess sanitary napkins. However, as she opened the box, I saw that its contents were not napkins but long, thickly wadded pads with gauze-like tails at each end. She showed me how to attach each pad's gauzy tails to the little toothed catches that dangled from the elastic belt. I stood up and tried to walk. It was hard to keep the pad between my legs from slipping around. I had to take mincing steps. When I tightened the belt in order to pull the pad against my body more snugly, the sharp, notched teeth of the catches cut into me. "You shouldn't complain," said my mother. "In Russia, there were no elastic belts or pads. We used rags and had to wash them out and reuse them."

She also said I should keep the box of pads at the back of the linen closet. I thought it made more sense to keep them on the floor near the toilet, at least while I needed them. But she said my father didn't like to see such things about. Even more important, I was to remember that "dirty" pads were not to be discarded in the bathroom wastebasket. I would have to wrap them in toilet paper and take them to the kitchen garbage so he wouldn't ever catch sight of them. Then she explained that I had become "physically mature" and would smell if I didn't use a product called Mum, a white cream with which I was to anoint my underarms every morning. The downside to Mum was that it also stained clothes. I would therefore have to pin crescent-shaped inserts of white cotton known as "shields" into each of my sweaters at the underarm seams from now on. The tiny gold safety pins she gave me to use for this purpose sometimes opened during the day and pricked me until I could find a private place where I could reach up into my sweater and try to close them with one hand.

Thus it was that I embarked on my high-school education—strapped into an elastic harness with a bulky pad between my legs, shielding the world from my unpleasant body odors with Mum and shields, and carrying an over-the-shoulder felt purse capacious enough for several Kleenex-wrapped Modess pads in addition to my brown-bag lunch. Gradually, my former grade-school friends drifted away, increasingly caught up in their lives at other schools. It wasn't easy to make new friends. Even though I knew my mother loved me and wanted only the best for me, I sometimes felt lonely—especially on those increasingly frequent occasions when I would glance up from the easy chair in the

living room where I was ensconced with a reading assignment, only to see that my mother had put down her mending and was looking at me from the sofa. Just looking at me. “What?” I would say. And she would sigh. “Do you really have to wear your glasses all the time?”

On Sundays, when we had store-bought iced cake from the bakery around the corner because my father was able to have dinner with us, the slice she cut for me became thinner and thinner, until it was the merest sliver. Then came the Sunday when she declared, “Better you should just have fruit.” I abandoned the easy chair in the living room and began reading on my stomach on the bed in my little room, which was the “half” of our three-and-a-half-room apartment. The round balls on the white cotton chenille bedspread made indentations in my elbows and arms, but I didn’t care.

In June 1944, my father organized a small group of musicians, advertised as “Mischa Raginsky and His Gypsy Trio,” to play until Labor Day at the Brighton Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey. My mother and I were going to join him there as soon as school was out. It would be a summer “at the shore!”

My mother was energized. So much to do, so little time to prepare. We had to go shopping to buy her a bathing suit, an undertaking of such magnitude it took us two trips. We worked our way up Fifth Avenue from Altman’s at 34th Street to Best & Company at 53rd, with stops along the way at Lord & Taylor, Russeks, Wanamaker’s, Saks Fifth Avenue, and De Pinna. I sat patiently on uncomfortable chairs in cell-like, unventilated dressing rooms with my mother’s handbag, dress, girdle, brassiere, and slip heaped on my lap, getting hot and damp while she wiggled her soft flesh into and out of maillots, two-piece suits, and skirted suits, examining herself in each one under the merciless overhead light—standing up, sitting down, sideways—while adjusting the rearview mirrors this way and that, and asking me what I thought.

There was some imagined imperfection in her upper thighs that gave her great concern. I myself thought the imperfection, if any, was in her breasts, which looked quite droopy when freed from the brassiere in which she normally encased them. She candidly acknowledged their decline. “It happened when I had you,” she explained. However, all of the bathing suits seemed to have a brassiere-like equivalent built into them, because once she had lowered her breasts into the tops of these suits, made some adjustments, and slipped on the shoulder straps, she looked as uplifted as any movie star.

For the upper thighs, unfortunately, there was no such remedy. Her final choice, at the end of the second day, was a navy blue one-piece affair that had a skirt sewn into the waist. I was so relieved we were done that I didn't mention that I thought it was on the motherly side and she had looked much better in some of the others. She was so relieved that she treated herself to a new beach coat to celebrate and also bought a new bathing suit for me, even though we had already agreed that the one I had from last year, though somewhat faded from chlorine, would do. Shopping for my suit was an easier proposition, although not entirely without its own element of unpleasantness. Best & Co. was still carrying the suit I had from last year, a puckered cotton one-piece with white polka dots on a black ground, which my mother had chosen because the saleslady had told us it was slenderizing. Now she simply bought it again—in reverse colors, black dots on white—but the next size up, which was the largest size in the Teen Department. “If you keep on getting bigger,” she said ominously as we waited for the elevator, “we’ll have to go to the Miss Department, where everything is more expensive.”

My father had gone on ahead with the rest of Mischa Raginsky's Gypsy Trio to find us a place to live and had already begun to work at the Brighton Hotel by the time we arrived on the train early in July. He owned a Rolleiflex camera, shaped like a box, with which he commemorated important occasions. After we had put our luggage in the two rooms he had leased for the summer on Pacific Avenue, we went for a walk on the Boardwalk for him to show us the sights. He brought along the camera and took a picture of me and a separate picture of my mother. In his picture of me, I stand against the railing of the Boardwalk in a plaid, cap-sleeve cotton dress that is getting tight under the arms and high in the waist, with head tilted sideways to escape the cruel glare of the sun, smiling dutifully into the middle distance with my eyes squeezed shut, my unmanageable hair frizzing out from my face in the damp ocean air. But the picture of my mother is wonderful. How beautiful she still is at thirty-nine, in her short-sleeved rayon print dress (an unseen, above-the-waist girdle hooked all the way up to ensure that her stomach is flat and her waist small), standing in high-heeled open-toed sling-back pumps that show off her pretty legs and ankles (although her feet, I know, are really “killing” her). She looks right at the camera, as my father has commanded, but her delicately rounded arm shields her eyes from the sun so that her lipsticked smile is genuinely sweet.

The two rooms my father found for us were above an establishment with a neon sign that said "BAR." BAR was never rowdy, my father assured my mother. As it turned out, he was right. All you could hear in our apartment, even at night, were the sounds of the jukebox, more often than not Frank Sinatra singing "bésame, bésame mucho" over and over, all summer long. The front room, facing the street, was furnished like a studio, with a sofa that turned into a pullout double bed. My parents took this room. The back room was really the eat-in kitchen, but the owner of BAR, who was the landlord, had added a single bed against the wall, with a studio couch cover for daytime, a small end table and lamp, and a three-drawer mini-bureau. This was the room where I slept. The bathroom was off the kitchen.

On our first day there, my father took us out for an early dinner after the stroll on the Boardwalk and then showered, changed, and went to work. He would be done at ten thirty.

At about ten o'clock, my mother suggested that it was time for bed. Then she smoothed her dress, combed her hair, moistened her eyebrows to "groom" them, freshened up her make-up, and splashed herself with Tweed cologne. She looked so pretty it occurred to me that my father might be tempted to assay an act of conjugal love, and, if I could stay awake, I would be able to hear them as they went about it in the front room. But after the excitements of the long day, I fell asleep almost as soon as she turned out the lights in the kitchen and didn't wake up until morning, when she came in, gently touched me, and said that in future it might be a good idea to try to stay tucked under the sheet at night because my father had to cross the kitchen to reach the bathroom and it wasn't right for me to be uncovered. I said it was hot in the kitchen, and anyway I wasn't uncovered; I was wearing my shortie pajamas. But all she said was, "Try." That whole summer, I never heard a thing from them at night. Either they were very quiet, or "Bésame Mucho" from BAR downstairs obscured the sounds of conjugal love in the front room, or I had been right in the first place about their being too old.

Atlantic City in 1944 was clearly the place to be! There were no vacancies at any of the grand old hotels on Ocean Avenue, where gift shops in the hotel lobbies with windows fronting the Boardwalk displayed expensive jeweled handbags and floating chiffon outfits that my mother said were lounging pajamas. In addition to wealthy hotel guests, however, the Boardwalk was also teeming with uniformed soldiers and sailors on leave, civilian day-trippers of all ages, and large family groups trailing small children. There were outdoor

demonstrators of marvelous kitchen implements, the likes of which I had never seen, who showed everyone who gathered round how easy it was to turn radishes into rosettes, slice juicy tomatoes razor-thin, scallop the edges of cucumbers, do remarkable things with carrots and potatoes—all with just *a single wonder tool*. There were sketch artists who, for only \$1.99, would do your portrait in charcoal for a loved one to treasure, and if you didn't have a loved one or \$1.99, which was my situation, you could still stand and watch all morning as portraits came into being of persons more fortunate in both respects. And on the big piers sticking out into the ocean, there were fun houses with scary rides and crazy mirrors that made you tall and thin, or wavy, or very short and wide, and larger-than-life posters, which changed every week and advertised the big bands playing in the pier ballrooms at night: Woody Herman and Jimmy Dorsey and Harry James!

We soon settled into a routine. In the morning, we changed into our suits and beach cover-ups; packed the blankets, thermos, towels, magazines, and a folding wooden beach chair in which my father liked to sit; and walked to the beach along Indiana Avenue, where my father stopped at the Brighton Hotel to pick up the mail. Then he led the way to the part of the beach where the rest of the Gypsy Trio was sunning itself, and which soon became known as “our spot.”

Mischa Raginsky's Gypsy Trio consisted of a violinist who toured the tables at dinner and shared any tips he collected from the diners, a pianist, and my father, who was the cellist. That summer, the violinist was Mr. Kushner, a gentleman of indeterminate age who looked as if he had breasts when he took his shirt off. His chest hair was gray, but the hair on his head was very black and plentiful, with a narrow part. His hair never got mussed, either, although when there was a breeze he would put on a sun hat. “A wig,” my mother told me later, when we had left the beach. “A too-pay,” my father corrected her. There was also a Mrs. Kushner, but she had stayed in the city because she had to take care of her mother, who was old and sick and lived with them. Once or twice she came out for the day on a weekend, but I cannot remember anything about her, except that, like her husband, she had unusual hair: although clearly her own (you could see the wiry gray hairs sprouting out of it), she had crimped it into neat rows of unnaturally even waves all over her head. “A style of the thirties,” my mother later confided with scorn. Despite his unappetizing appearance, my mother seemed to like Mr. Kushner and always had some light but pleasant conversation with him at the beach. Mr. Kushner told my father that my mother was a very good-looking woman. My father told

my mother and me that Mr. Kushner, whom he called “Irv” to his face and “Kushner” to us, was only a so-so violinist but the best he could get to come to Atlantic City on such short notice.

The pianist was Mr. Winograd, a tall, bony man with a crown of short, silvery hair circling his nearly bald head. I never did learn his first name, as my father always called him “Winograd,” even to his face. Mr. Winograd was already very brown from the sun, and his skin was dry-looking. He wore small, round sunglasses clipped to his regular glasses, but he would slide the glasses down his nose when he talked to me so I could see his eyes, which were gray and twinkly. My father said, when the three of us were alone, that Winograd was a very good pianist.

Mrs. Winograd was small, hunched-over, and worried-looking, with a long, skinny, wrinkled neck. She twisted her thin hair into a knot, wore no make-up, and had shapeless, colorless clothing. To protect her head from the sun, she wore a small cotton kerchief folded in half, just above her eyebrows, and tied in back. Once, when she took it off to refold it, I saw a bit of pink scalp showing between strands of her sparse gray hair. She seemed very old, although she was probably no older than Mr. Winograd. When we talked about the Winograds during family strolls, my father always referred to Mrs. Winograd as “Kooritza,” with emphasis on the first syllable, which my mother told me later meant “old chicken.”

But there was more to Winograd and Kooritza than met the eye. As my father privately told my mother, *they weren't really married!* My mother of course obtained the full story from my father. It seems, she explained to me as soon as he left for work, they couldn't marry because Kooritza, the old chicken, still had a husband, who had left her with two very little boys, under undisclosed circumstances, about fifteen years before.

“Did she look like she does now when Mr. Winograd met her?” I asked.

My mother shrugged. “She can't have been a beauty, can she?” Then, sounding suspiciously like my father, she said, “He is a very good man. He raised those little boys as if they were his own.” After a thoughtful pause, she added, “And, you know, she keeps house for him and looks after him. That's something.”

“But do her children know he's not their father?” I persisted, overcome with the drama of it, despite the drab appearance of the protagonists.

"I have no idea, and you mustn't ask," said my mother firmly. "Don't say *anything* about this at the beach."

All the same, I couldn't help thinking about it when I lay on the sand, baking in their company. How did the Old Chicken, whom I still thought of as Mrs. Winograd when I was in her presence, bear the secret shame and disgrace of it? I was becoming aware that my mother was quite snooty with Mrs. Winograd, compared to the affable manner in which she passed the time of day with Mr. Winograd and Mr. Kushner. Was it Mrs. Winograd's appearance or the fact that she was "living in sin" with Winograd of which my mother particularly disapproved? Or could it be that my mother simply liked men better than women? The Old Chicken seemed oblivious to the chill in my mother's manner. She went on making conversation about the weather and what a nice big girl I was, in a strong accent that did not sound Russian to me and that my mother said was Yiddish.

But if Winograd and Kooritz were living in sin, that must mean that they still performed acts of conjugal love. From between nearly closed eyelids, I would scrutinize them huddled together over their lunch basket and try to picture his long brown pianist's fingers caressing her wispy gray hair and wrinkled cheeks. Impossible.

And where were the fatherless sons? To this last question, which was a socially acceptable one, there was an answer. Morty was "in the service," and Harold, who was nearly sixteen, was going to be a senior at Brooklyn Tech. Harold had a summer job but might come to the beach later on. Mrs. Winograd looked at me when she said this. It would be good for him, she added to my mother; he was working so hard. My mother, the Boss's Wife, inclined her head distantly to indicate that she had heard but was not really interested.

So the days and weeks passed. After my father went to work in his summer tuxedo, my mother and I would have a shower and change, and she would sweep up the sand in the apartment. We would then go out to a grocer and a butcher on Atlantic and buy something to cook for our dinner. After dinner, when the dishes were washed, it was time for our evening stroll on the Boardwalk. This was when my mother could gaze at her leisure into the windows of the shops she called exclusive, price desirable items, and estimate by how much they might be marked down if they were still there at the end of the season. We did not spend any of these evenings with the Old Chicken, although she must have been nearby and all by herself while Winograd worked.

My mother's fortieth birthday arrived. My parents didn't celebrate it. "What's to celebrate?" said my mother. "Don't remind me." My own thirteenth birthday came one week later. (This day was also my parents' wedding anniversary, a coincidence which to my mind invited ribald inferences I always felt I needed to refute. "No, I wasn't born the day they were married. I came along six years after that," I would say.) My parents didn't celebrate their anniversary, either. "What do you want for your birthday?" asked my mother. "There's really nothing to buy for you here." I knew she meant clothes.

"Books?" I suggested. My mother gave me a look I hadn't seen for a few weeks. But she took me to a wonderful bookstore on the Boardwalk near Ohio Avenue, where after much indecision, I selected three Modern Library titles from the shelf. "Good choices," exclaimed the woman behind the cash register. She seemed inclined to say something more, but my mother paid and hurried me out. She was dying for a cigarette, she said.

After my birthday dinner with her in the kitchen, she said we could forget about not eating cake today because a birthday was a special occasion. Then she brought out three iced cupcakes on a plate and put a candle in one of them, which she lit from a match from the stove. "Make a wish," she said. I closed my eyes and dutifully wished that I would have a healthy, happy year and opened my eyes and blew out the candle. "Your wish will come true!" declared my mother. We saved one cupcake for my father, but she told me I could have the other two.

I took my new Modern Library *Jane Eyre* to the beach the next day. As I lay turning its pages in an exploratory way, wondering why I didn't feel different now that I was a teenager, I heard my name. Two pretty feet with scarlet-painted toenails stepped into my line of vision and came to a stop at the edge of my towel. I looked up, squinting, past a pair of shapely golden-brown legs and a well-filled bright red swimsuit. Did I know this curvaceous beauty looking down at me with luxuriously fringed sea-green eyes? She had dark brown wavy hair, cut short the way Esther Williams wore hers, and lusciously full red lips that glistened in the sun.

Apparently I did know her. It was Joanie Lucas, from Gym. She was not in my section of the first-year high-school class (which meant she had scored lower on the entrance exam), so our acquaintance was distant. Moreover, she had certainly never looked like *this* on the volleyball courts in the school gymnasium, where we all wore hospital-green gym suits with baggy bloomer legs held just above the knee by

elastic bands, gym socks, and rubber-soled shoes (so as not to ruin the gymnasium floor). I was so awed by Joanie's transformation into this breathtaking pinup girl, and so pleased to see someone about my age, that I closed *Jane Eyre* and sat up at once. Joanie perched companionably at the corner of my towel, offered me a Chiclet which she extracted delicately with red-tipped fingers from a little zippered bag she had in her hand, took one herself, and proceeded to tell me she was visiting her grandmother for a few weeks, she didn't get to the beach every day because she had to help out around the house but she did manage it every once in a while, and wasn't it exciting with all the guys in service who were here, and she was so glad to see me because she really didn't know anyone at all except some kids in her grandmother's neighborhood, and they never went to the beach for some reason.

She had come by bus. She would go back by bus. She had her bus fare in the little bag, and also enough money for a Coke. But she had no towel, no cover-up. She had come in just her suit and beach shoes. "Why not?" she asked. "It's hot out. Why do I need to bring a lot of stuff?" I introduced her to my mother, to Mr. Kushner, to Winograd and Kooritza. She grinned and offered Chiclets all around. The Old Chicken took a Chiclet, her wrinkled face creasing in a smile. I knew my mother disapproved of chewing gum.

"Let's go for a dip," I suggested as a diversionary tactic. I loved braving the waves, even if they roughed me up a bit, as long as I didn't swallow too much salt water. I would turn my back on them just as they broke and ride back on the crest. Joanie was agreeable. She walked ahead of me toward the surf, her pert red behind wiggling this way and that as she picked her way through pebbles, cigarette butts, and washed-up seaweed. But she stopped at the water's edge. "I really can't," she said regretfully. "It's that time of month. Besides," she added, "I just fixed my hair this morning." So we walked along the water's edge and talked about school, and grades (here she was evasive), and girls we both knew, and movies we had seen, and movie stars we thought were handsome. Joanie was crazy about Tyrone Power. She could just die looking at him. I had no strong preferences one way or the other but wasn't about to admit that, so I said I myself liked Ronald Reagan very much and could barely watch when *King's Row* got to the part where he found out that he had lost his legs. We agreed that Jane Wyman wasn't as good-looking as he was and that it was a shame he had married her. Then Joanie got down to more important matters. Was I dating in Atlantic City?

"Dating?" I mumbled. "Dating who?"

"Well, that's what I'm asking," she said, cracking her gum a trifle impatiently. "Do you know any guys? Have they got friends?"

I hesitated. I had never dated anyone, let alone in Atlantic City. "Mrs. Winograd's son is coming next week," I offered. "He's nearly sixteen. He'll be going to college year after next. If he's not drafted." I hoped that this would be good enough.

Joanie brightened perceptibly. "Is he cute?" she asked. "I'll still be here then."

"I don't know if he's cute," I said. "I haven't met him yet." I was starting not to like the conversation. "Don't you have to be getting back home?" I asked. "Aren't you going to, um, soak through if you don't change soon?"

"Oh, I don't bother with stupid old pads anymore," she declared, turning back the way we had come. "I use Tampax. They last for hours. Once you try them, you'll never go back to pads."

Tampax. Could girls like us wear them? You had to put them *in*. And if she wasn't wearing a pad.... "So why didn't you go in the water?" I asked.

Joanie shrugged. "And get messed up? What's the point of coming to the beach if I'm going to look like a drowned rat?" Then she added cheerfully, "I do have to be getting home, though. I promised Gran. Tell your mother good-bye for me. And the others, too, of course. Maybe you can come to my house some afternoon when I can't get to the beach."

"Maybe," I said, thinking of my mother.

Joanie nodded, as if it were all set. "I'll just cut to the Boardwalk here then," she said. "I left my beach shoes with a guy my uncle knows who has a hot-dog stand up this way. They're kind of ugly. So I don't like to wear them once I'm here." And with a graceful little wave, she was gone, leaving me to make the return trip by myself.

"She's quite mature," my mother remarked when we were back in our rooms and had showered and changed. "She's actually in your class?" But when I told her about the Tampax and asked why I couldn't use it too, my mother's face turned grim. "Absolutely not," she declared. "You're not married yet. You want to ruin everything?"

"Joanie's not married yet, either," I protested. "And *she* can use it."

"Who knows what Joanie has been doing?" said my mother darkly.

I knew what she meant. A deflowered Joanie? Could it be? "Well, do you like her anyway?" I asked.

“She does have a nice little figure,” my mother conceded. “I’m surprised she’s in your school, though. Are the other girls so common?”

Common or no, Joanie continued to show up at our spot with fair regularity, and what could my mother do? Besides the red bathing suit, she also had a green suit that brought out the color of her eyes and a royal blue two-piece suit that displayed the curved golden middle part of her to great advantage. However, once we had seen each other’s beach wardrobes, we didn’t have much more to talk about. She had absolutely no interest in *Jane Eyre* or in my other birthday books, which were *Vanity Fair* and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. I began bringing old copies of my mother’s magazines to the beach to exchange for copies of Joanie’s sister’s movie magazines, so we would have more topics to discuss.

At the beginning of August, Harold Winograd arrived from the city. As my mother and I trudged through the sand toward our spot, Kooritza waved to us. There were introductions all around. “Hi,” said Harold. Plopping down on my towel, I slipped out of my beach shoes, emptied them of sand, and inspected him.

Although obviously older than me, he was still what I called a boy. He was drawing something with a pencil in a small notebook of unlined paper. Even though he was sitting down, I could tell he was tall from his long, skinny legs. He was also very pale, compared to the rest of us who had been in the sun all summer, and he wore thick glasses that made his eyes small unless you looked at him from the side; then you could see that his eyes were actually quite large. His mother kept urging him to take off his shirt, but he wouldn’t. “Later, Ma,” he said. I wondered if he wanted to stay covered because his chest, as far as I could tell, was thin and narrow. He had wide shoulders, though. You could see his shoulder bones through his shirt. Well, he was someone to talk to, anyway.

He was doing quick sketches of people on the beach. He showed me one of a man sitting and fanning himself with a shirt cardboard, others of an older woman leaning on her elbows and eating a bunch of grapes, and of a mother and little girl making sand pies with a pail and shovel. “How do you do that without an eraser?” I asked. He shrugged modestly. He said he really wished he could go to Pratt after high school, but there was no money in art, so he guessed he would wind up at CCNY studying engineering instead. If he wasn’t drafted first.

“You won’t be drafted!” said Kooritza emphatically. “He has very bad eyes,” she explained to my mother. “And asthma. Sometimes his asthma is very bad.”

“Ah, c’mon, Ma,” Harold said. “Stop it.”

“Funny-looking boy,” said my mother when they were gone. “But he could grow out of it. I wonder what his father looked like.”

On Monday, Harold and I were deep in a game of gin rummy when Joanie arrived at the beach. She was wearing her red. “Well, hi!” she said, sounding as if meeting Harold was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to her. “I’ve heard so much about you. And now you’re finally here at last.” She arranged herself to best advantage on half of my towel, as if she were part of the family. Harold really had a very nice smile. I hadn’t noticed it yesterday.

“What did you hear?” he asked.

“Oh, I shouldn’t tell you, you’ll just get a swelled head,” Joanie giggled. “But all right, if you’re going to make me.” She looked up at him from beneath her long fringed lashes. “What I heard is that you’re really cute and really smart, and now that I’ve met you, I can see that it’s all true.” After a moment, she added, “Of course, Nina’s really smart, too.” (She meant me.) “I guess you’ve noticed that already. I’m just so lucky to be spending time with all you smart people.”

I won the gin rummy hand while she was talking. Harold didn’t want to play another. Joanie didn’t want to play just yet, either. Not when the conversation was so fascinating, she said. So the three of us talked instead. My mother stopped turning the pages of her magazine and closed her eyes, as if to doze in the sun. I knew she was listening, though. Joanie said she had been named after Joan Crawford, whom her mother had seen in an old movie called *Our Dancing Daughters*. Which would be perfectly fine, except that everyone had always called her Joanie since she was born, and Joanie was so little-girlish, and if they weren’t going to call her Joan, which after all was her *right* name, she thought she would begin spelling Joanie with just an “i” at the end to make it more different and grown-up, and what did we think?

Harold didn’t quite follow this, although he was clearly trying, but I got it and said at once, so he could see how silly she was, “You mean J-o-a-n-i? That’s not a name!”

But what Harold said was that your name could be anything you wanted to call yourself, and if Joanie wanted to call herself “Joani” with an “i,” she should do it because now there was a war on, life was unpredictable, and we should all do the things we wanted to do before it was too late. At this, we both looked suitably solemn for a

moment, until Harold said, “So, do you want me to call you Joan? Or Joani with an ‘i’?”

Joanie lowered her eyes in pretty confusion. But then she quickly looked up and said, as if she were shy, “Oh, Joani with an ‘i,’ please!”

I got back to the subject of the impermanence of life as soon as I could. I said Harold was right about how we never could know what was around the corner, as was illustrated by the Romans, about whom we had learned in World History. The Romans couldn’t possibly have known that they were doomed, and went on eating and fiddling and making merry as if they had all the time in the world, when actually they were poisoning themselves with the lead in their cooking pots and would soon all be dead. Also, I added, there were the Huns. They came, they conquered, and then they were gone, boom, and it was the Middle Ages.

When I was done, Joanie asked Harold if he knew a certain Roger S., who was a good friend of her older sister and went to Brooklyn Tech. It turned out that Harold did know him. In addition to Roger S., it also appeared that Harold knew several other Brooklyn Tech students—“guys,” as Joanie called them—who Joanie’s sister was “seeing.” After a while, Joanie felt as if she were burning. Stretching out on most of my towel, she extracted a small bottle of lotion from her bag and asked Harold if he could put it on for her, so she wouldn’t peel later. I was surprised at this because she had never once, during any of our beach meetings, expressed such concerns before. I watched Harold carefully smooth the white lotion over her lovely brown shoulders, arms, and back. “Can’t have you peeling,” he said.

“Mmmm,” she murmured. “That feels so-o-o nice. Could you do my legs, too? Please?”

It took him quite a while. My eyes were fixed on every long, slow stroke. I had never noticed how hairy Joanie was. Her arms and legs were actually covered with long thick hairs. They were golden now from the sun and hard to notice because she was so tan. But I was sure they would show up once she faded, and how! Unfortunately, Harold seemed oblivious to this blemish, and I couldn’t think of a tactful way of bringing it to his attention.

At last, Joanie had to go. She dusted herself off, carefully brushing imaginary grains of sand from her arms and legs. “I’ll walk you,” Harold offered.

“All right,” she agreed. “But just to the hot-dog stand. The rest of the way is much too far.”

"I'll come, too," I said. So Harold and I walked Joanie up the sand to where she had checked her beach shoes with her uncle's friend, and then watched her amble away down Delaware Avenue, red suit wiggling to and fro for all to see.

"I think I'll just get on home from here if you don't mind," said Harold when she had finally disappeared from view. "There's the three of us, and just one shower. Would that be all right?" I walked back over the sand to our spot alone.

On the way home, my mother said to me, "You shouldn't show off all the time how smart you are."

"But I *am* smart," I said. "Why should I hide it?"

"Boys don't like it," she said.

"Well, isn't that too bad!"

"Too bad for who?" my mother said.

Surprisingly, Joanie made it to the beach four days in a row after that. She explained that she had worked out a new arrangement with her grandmother whereby she would do most of the household chores very early in the morning and finish up when she got home in the late afternoon. We played three-handed rummy, and Joanie almost never won, and we watched Harold sketch more sunbathers, and Joanie said he was so talented she just couldn't believe it, and the two of them discussed popular songs I had never heard of, and Joanie told him about some really terrific places to go dancing in Brooklyn, and every day he smoothed lotion all over the front and back of her. She must have gone through about three bottles of lotion in the four days. She also wore her royal blue two-piece three times in a row, so of course Harold had to put lotion on the front and back of her midriff, too. She needed to be especially careful there, she explained, because she hadn't worn the blue suit much, so that part of her wasn't used to the sun. I thought she had some nerve horning in on us like that on a daily basis when actually Harold sort of belonged to me, because of Winograd playing piano for my father. But as my mother had said—and now I saw that my mother was right—Joanie was common, there was no other word for it. Anyway, I was sure Harold was just passing time with her to be nice and that he understood I was the one who was the sort of girl to be serious about. However, I stopped walking with them to the hot-dog stand, because what was the point if he was going to go right home afterward?

On Saturday, Joanie finally failed to show up. Harold knew why. There was some kind of party in the neighborhood, and she had to

help with the preparations. “What kind of party?” I asked. She had said nothing to me about this.

“Something to do with her uncle and his friends,” Harold said. I wondered how he had found out.

Everyone agreed the day was a scorcher. When the men got up to shower, eat, and dress for work, Kooritza said it was too hot in their apartment and she and Harold were staying at the beach for a while. They would buy hamburgers on the Boardwalk for dinner. Kooritza eat hamburgers? This was truly extraordinary. I asked my mother if we could stay, too. She looked uncertain until my father and Winograd said of course we should stay, so in the end that’s what we did. Over my mother’s protests, Kooritza insisted that the hamburgers and fries and Breyers Dixie Cups were her treat. Harold went up to the Boardwalk to get them. Then the four of us had a picnic on the towels, after which Kooritza said she would take care of getting rid of the trash and why didn’t we two young ones go for a walk while there was still some light out. My mother said only that the hamburgers had been good and it was nice not to have to cook. But as she hadn’t said I shouldn’t go, I got up quickly and brushed myself off.

We made our way along the shoreline, stopping to look at unusual shells. Harold knew the names of some of them and told me what they were, but I have always had trouble remembering things like that, so the names melted away as soon as he pronounced them. He asked what I wanted to do when I grew up, and I said I supposed that some day I would get married and have children like everyone else. Then he said well, of course, but that’s not what he meant. Wasn’t there anything I really and truly wanted to *do*? This wasn’t the way the conversation was supposed to be going, but finally I said that when I was *very* little I had thought it might be fun to build bridges like my father would have done if he had stayed in Russia. He had been studying engineering at the university in Baku just before they left. On the other hand, math was turning out not to be my best subject, and engineers were always men, weren’t they? Besides, if I were off building bridges, who would take care of the house and make dinner for my husband? Harold said that taking care of the house and making dinner was all his mother did, but that she was very intelligent when you got to know her and could have done a lot more and would probably have been happier if she had. I said I did like to read, and maybe I could do something with that in my spare time when I was married. Harold said that was certainly something to consider.

We reached the Steel Pier, went up the ramp, walked partway around the perimeter, and leaned over the railing, looking sideways over the ocean. Neither of us had brought any money to go inside. "Are you scared to be drafted?" I asked.

"My brother's been in the war two years," Harold said. "He was in Italy until a while ago. Now he must be in France. We haven't heard anything for a couple of months, though. I'd really like to go too, but Ma's probably right. I don't think they're going to take me."

"You're not that sick, are you?"

"How sick is 'that' sick?" he asked. "Let's just say I'm sick enough."

We looked down some more at the surf crashing on the shore. Now that we had had so much important and serious conversation, I wondered if he might possibly be thinking about kissing me. But he didn't move closer, our elbows on the railing never touched, and after a while he said the fog was really rolling in and we had better be getting back. I was a little disappointed, but I knew I had to be patient. These things couldn't be hurried; Mr. Rochester was taking practically half the book to propose to Jane Eyre. Just before we reached our spot, I said that I had enjoyed the walk and maybe we could do it again tomorrow. Harold said that would be nice but he wasn't going to be at the beach tomorrow, there were some things he had to do at home for his mother. Well, the next day then, I said. And he said, "Sure, let's see how it goes."

However, the next day, Kooritza came with Winograd to the beach. What could Harold be doing for his mother in their apartment without his mother being there? I thought about our serious and important conversation and tried to decide what I would say I wanted to be when I grew up in case he asked again. But he wasn't there Monday, either. And on Tuesday, none of the Winograds showed up. My father thought something bad might have happened and he would have to find a replacement musician from Philadelphia to come play piano that night; he went to a pay phone on the Boardwalk to call. It turned out that Winograd had every intention of coming to work; he was simply attending to a family matter that morning. On Wednesday, Kooritza arrived at our spot alone, breathless with apologies. Winograd was taking Harold to the train. Harold's boss had called. He was needed back at his summer job in the city. He was very sorry. He asked her to say good-bye to us all. He had enjoyed his time with us very much.

Joanie hadn't been around since the previous Friday. Now that there was nothing more to look forward to with Harold, I began to wonder about her uncle's party on Saturday and what it had been like. She

turned up Thursday morning. “Hi,” she said, not sitting down. “Did you hear? Hal went back to the city.”

Hal.

“How did *you* know?” I asked.

“Well, he *told* me, of course,” she said. “He called just before he left. You know he came over on Sunday. And Monday, too.”

“He came to your house?”

“That’s what I said. It was really great. For lunch the first day, I made cheese and tomato and mayo on white, with the crusts off, and Kool-Aid.”

“What kind of Kool-Aid?” I asked mechanically, just to be saying something.

“Cherry, I think. I really don’t remember.”

“And then what did you do?”

“Oh, *you* know. Went up to my room. Listened to the radio. Fooled around. He may not be much for looks, but he’s a terrific kisser, let me tell you. *And* he’s going to call me in the city. What do you think of that?”

I didn’t ask what she had made for lunch the second day. I imagined Harold and Joanie entwined on Joanie’s double bed in her small room behind her closed door, with “Bésame Mucho” playing softly in the background. Joanie was able to use Tampax. I imagined Harold hungrily for all of Joanie’s body, and not in vain. “If you like him, I think that’s fine,” I said, as if I didn’t care.

“Anyway,” said Joanie, “I can’t stay. I just came over to say good-bye. My sister thinks it’s not fair that I’m getting all the beach, so we’re trading places for the rest of the summer. She’s coming out to stay with Gran, and I’m going home today. Can you believe it?” She made the rounds of the towels. She was particularly vivacious with Kooritza, who nodded impassively. “Well, see you in Gym,” she said to me. For once, my mother said nothing.

I didn’t make much progress with *Jane Eyre* in the days that followed, although there wasn’t much else to do at the beach. I was reading the line “And where is Mr. Rochester?” over and over, holding down the page against the breeze, when my father arrived with the mail. I looked up. He had something for me. Kooritza was smiling. It was a letter from Harold. Closing *Jane Eyre*, I sat up and carefully slit the envelope with my finger. The letter was a full page long. Harold had nice even handwriting. There was nothing in the letter about Joanie. He wrote that it was sweltering in the city, and that his job was pretty

boring but would be over soon, and that he was still trying to figure out what to take his last year of high school. He also wrote that he was really going to have to clean up the apartment before his mother came home, but it would be good to get back to eating her cooking; he was just about living on peanut butter sandwiches and milk, though I shouldn't tell her that. Then he wrote that if I wanted to build bridges, I should build bridges, and if I wanted to do something else, I should do that. But whatever I decided to do, he wished me the very best in my studies, although he was sure I would do just fine. The letter ended, "See you around. Your friend, Harold."

I read it three times, until I knew it by heart, and then put it back inside its envelope, slid the envelope inside *Jane Eyre*, pulled on my shorts and shirt, and said I felt like going for a walk by the water. Everyone nodded. I went in the direction of the Steel Pier. A full page. Nothing about calling me in the city, though. And what did "see you around" mean? Did he think our families were going to be seeing each other socially? Why should he think that? Maybe I was supposed to answer. There was a return address on the envelope. Was that a hint? He had given me an opening for an answer because he hadn't said what courses he had decided to take. I could ask about that. But if he was my "friend," why did he sign himself "Harold" and not "Hal"?

I was still considering these questions after dinner. I took the letter out of *Jane Eyre* and read it a fourth time at the kitchen table while my mother did the dishes. Then she came over and sat down next to me. "Don't make too much of that letter," she said. She put her hand on mine for a moment. I pulled my hand away.

"Why not?"

"He also sent a postcard to Kooritza," my mother said. "This morning. Your father read it."

"So? Why is he reading other people's mail, anyway?"

My mother indicated with her head that this was of no importance. "You should know what he put on the postcard," she said.

I looked at her.

"He said"—she paused—"I am writing to Nina as you told me to."

I put the letter down on the table.

"Don't make a fool of yourself," said my mother.

I folded the letter and slid it back into the envelope.

My mother seemed to want to tell me something more. She touched my hand again. I knew she wanted to comfort me for what she had just done. "When we get back to the city, we'll put you on a diet," she said.

I tore the envelope containing the letter into many little bits and pushed them far down into the garbage, beneath the orange peels and the coffee grounds.

It rained for a few days after that. Good. I was tired of the beach, of the razor-thin sliced tomatoes, of the candy machines and the sketch artists. I had walked up and down the Boardwalk until I could recite the names of every shop and hotel in sequence. It would be fine with me if I never saw Atlantic City again. I wanted to get back to school and the rest of Algebra I and Latin and Biology and World History and English, where we were going to read *Ivanhoe*. And after that, there would be Plane Geometry and Solid Geometry and Algebra II and French and Physics and Chemistry and American History. I could hardly wait. I understood school, I was good at school, I knew how to get all A's at school, and it wasn't even hard for me to do. Meanwhile it went on raining, and I stretched out on the single bed in the kitchen and buried myself in my book:

“...Jane, accept me quickly. Say Edward—give me my name—Edward—I will marry you.”

“Are you in earnest? Do you truly love me? Do you sincerely wish me to be your wife?”

“I do; and if an oath is necessary to satisfy you, I swear it.”

“Then, sir, I will marry you.”

“Edward—my little wife!”

“Dear Edward!”

“Come to me—come to me entirely now,” said he; and added, in his deepest tone, speaking in my ear as his cheek was laid on mine, “Make my happiness—I will make yours.”

“God pardon me!” he subjoined ere long; “and man meddle not with me: I have her, and will hold her.”

“There is no one to meddle, sir. I have no kindred to interfere.”

“No—that is the best of it,” he said. And if I had loved him less I should have thought his accent and look of exultation savage; but, sitting by him, roused from the nightmare of parting—called to the paradise of union—I thought only of the bliss given me to drink in so abundant a flow.

Although Mischa Raginsky and His Gypsy Trio was scheduled to stay on through Labor Day, my mother and I went back to the city at the end of August so we could get me ready for school. The evening before we left, we took one last walk on the Boardwalk. We strolled in the direction of the Steel Pier. It was dinner hour at all the hotels, and the beach was nearly deserted, although a few people still lingered on the Boardwalk. To avoid reaching the pier and thoughts best avoided, I stopped as if in need of a rest and looked down over the railing at the sand. A single sunbather remained, stretched out on a long blue towel with her back to the last rays of the sun. She was small and blonde and slender, with silky shoulder-length hair and a pretty little nose that I could see because her head on the towel was turned in our direction. Although her eyes were closed, I thought they must be blue. From where we stood, she could have been Lana Turner or Betty Grable, except of course she wasn't; she was younger and, as I knew my mother might say—more "refined." My mother's gaze followed mine. After a while, she said sadly, "You could look like that. If you tried."

I had just turned thirteen, but I was sure I was already taller than the young woman on the blue towel. I was certainly bigger. I had large, strong bones and a nose that was not small. My brown hair was curly, and my hips, like my mother's, were wide. A time would come when men would look into my dark eyes and whisper that I was beautiful. But that was still far ahead. All I could know in the twilight of this last evening, as I gripped the railing of the Boardwalk tightly with both hands, was that my mother no longer loved me as I was.