

# Three Sisters

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Daniel saw that his bedroom door was open a crack. He peered in cautiously and found the room empty. At the foot of his half-made bed lay two open suitcases frozen in the act of regurgitating a Technicolor sprawl of holiday sweaters and oversize blouses. On his bedstand rested a sleeping mask and a portable humidifier. Across the room at his desk, the chair had been turned around to face a footbath-massager. Everything down to the large, pink terrycloth bathrobe hanging from the hook on the closet door betrayed evidence of foreign occupation.

He shut the door behind him and sat in his desk chair for a full minute in silence. A draft came from the window. With an absent sigh he leaned back to look down to the street below. Barely five o'clock and already dark out. The dim, yellowish light cast by the streetlamp was suspended in an early evening fog, and the lonely red glow of the abandoned Coke machine in the distance by the railroad tracks reminded him obliquely that it was Christmas Eve.

With an even bigger sigh, Daniel turned to complete the mission for which he had invaded occupied territory. Pushing aside the tubes of mascara and lipstick and the mint-green eye shadow littering his desk, he moved a stack of books and rescued his journal from its cigar box hiding place. He cleared space enough to open it and smoothed out its creamy white and faintly blue-lined pages. He uncapped a pen and held it over the first clean page. But after a long moment lost in thought, he knew it was still impossible to express what he needed to say.

From downstairs he heard the phone ring. He looked up to find that his door was now

wide open and his younger sister was standing in the doorway staring at him.

“Out of my room, Hannah!” Daniel yelled. He ran to push the five-year-old out into the hallway and started to close door on her, but Hannah threw herself against it.

“Mom told me to make you come down and—”

“Great, fine. Just gimme a second!” Daniel quickly went back to his desk and slipped the journal back into its hiding place, then followed his sister downstairs. “Walk down like a human being!” he snapped, stepping past her as she slid down the stairs one by one on her rear end.

In the corner of the living room, between the couch and the TV, stood a large plastic Christmas tree glittering with bubble lights and topped with an angel that looked like he might once have been the drummer in an eighties rock band. Already a considerable sprawl of presents surrounded it, but the avalanche of counterfeit Santa presents would not be set out until after Hannah’s bedtime.

On the blaring radio, deejay Kemosabe Joe was still pleading with listeners to pledge money to Z104’s Christmas Cash for Kids. “Bit late for that, isn’t it?” Daniel said, crossing the room to change the dial.

“Hey, I’m listening to that!” Hannah howled.

“It’s a stupid telethon. Wouldn’t you rather listen to Rudolph or Frosty like a normal kid?”

“I *like* it,” Hannah said. “And Mommy said I could listen.” She flopped back on the couch.

“Fine,” said Daniel. Then he turned back to her suspiciously. “You realize the presents they buy don’t go to squirts like you...” Hannah looked at him for a moment like he was an idiot, then returned her attention to the speaker next to her. “Han, they’re for poor people and, like,

sick kids who have to spend Christmas in the hospital and stuff...” Hannah’s mouth scrunched up on one side as she squinted at him. “You *do* know that, right?” he asked again.

“Hmph,” harrumphed Hannah as she passed him and to change the station herself. A moment later the room was bouncing with the bopping beat of “Jingle Bell Rock.” Daniel chuckled as he continued on to the kitchen.

Sipping a cup of Sanka and smoking a cigarette, Daniel’s aunt Roseanne sat at the table as Marion, his mother, basted the ham for their Christmas Eve feast. Both wore their favorite red-and-green holiday sweaters, but Aunt Roseanne’s played Christmas carols and her blinking Christmas tree earrings gave her the competitive edge. Recent eye surgery had rendered her ultra-sensitive to light, and for a two weeks she would have to wear big black boxy sunglasses that Daniel thought made her look like a scientist observing an atomic test blast. The cloud of stale cigarette smoke hovering about her was steeped in her distinctive lilac perfume, which one could almost *see* billowing off of her. The moment she had limped blindly into the kitchen weeks before, the smell had permeated the house like potpourri or a chemical fumigation. Roseanne brushed off an ash that had fallen down her front, and the little ornamental bells hanging from her sweater jingled tinnily.

Each year, the sight of Aunt Roseanne pulling into the driveway in her Ford Aerostar, the backseat crammed with presents and two large suitcases, was to the Kenning family the harbinger of winter’s arrival, the very incarnation of the holiday season. Like Christmas itself, Aunt Roseanne was big and loud and brightly colored, fun for the kids but stressful and tiring to adults. Over the past few years, but most definitely this one, Daniel had found his appreciation for her tending more toward the adult end of the spectrum.

“Can you feed Roscoe for me, dear?” Aunt Roseanne asked Daniel as he entered. “I would get up, but my knees...”

Aunt Roseanne had a knack for getting others to serve her simply by citing one of her many real or imaginary ailments. She was a hypochondriac of the first order: she had strong-armed her doctors into prescribing her a pharmacy's worth of medications (and then blamed them for the complications they entailed). Yet despite her paranoia about her health, she did suffer from a number of real conditions. Due to her weight, she was on the fast track to knee and ankle replacement, and years of smoking had led to persistent and possibly pre-emphysemic combination hack-and-wheeze. Not to mention her hypertension and eye trouble. Since the latter had proven serious enough to require surgery there was no longer any arguing with her about the authenticity of her myriad conditions. As Marion had noted: "There's nothing worse than a hypochondriac with medical problems." Roseanne had once worried so much about having an ulcer that she'd given herself an ulcer.

"I just fed him an hour ago," said Marion impatiently.

"Oh, but he loves his Kibbles 'n Bits," Roseanne cooed at the toy poodle at her feet, who was himself not a little overweight. "Doesn't he? Doesn't he? Yes..." Roscoe wagged his poofy tail and jumped up against her leg. Daniel obediently filled the plump little dog's bowl.

For the past seven years, Aunt Roseanne had arrived the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and stayed until the second of January. (This year, it had fallen on Marion to drive down to North Carolina in their Chevy Caprice to pick her sister up for the holidays.) The tradition had started the year Roseanne was recovering from a bout of clinical depression following her second divorce. Marion, the protecting angel of the family, had convinced her then-new husband, Ed, to invite Roseanne to stay with them until she was back on her feet. With the help of a cocktail of antidepressants, things had gradually brightened for Roseanne. But each year toward mid-November, a funk settled on her anew like a dark yuletide cloud, and each year she again needed

consolation and company.

Some visits had been better than others, but the days between Christmas and New Year's were always a crapshoot. This year, her temporary blindness was sure to introduce a new level of random bizarreness to their holiday experience. Displays of martyrdom were sure to rival those of the birthday boy, and the level of service would doubtless have to be improved by at least one star.

"Set the table, Daniel," said Marion, putting the ham back in the oven. "Not the dining room, just in here tonight."

"But how are we going to fit at the kitchen table?" he asked. "You and dad, Aunt Roseanne, Aunt Alison, Uncle Oz, Ruth, Hannah, Dawn, and me."

"Ruth and Oscar," said Aunt Roseanne, "are spending the week with *his* family this year."

"And Alison just called to say that she won't be able to make it down from Philadelphia till tomorrow," Daniel's mother added.

"What's she doing there?" Daniel asked, annoyed by the news that his favorite family member had been delayed.

"That's where Oz's family lives, honey," said Aunt Roseanne. She had a tendency sometimes to talk to her nieces and nephew as though they, too, were toy poodles.

"So he and Ruth aren't coming," he said. "But Aunt Alison will be here tomorrow?"

"Yes," said Marion, "and I hope she isn't late. I can't stand all these last-minute changes from everyone." Daniel was not aware of any other last-minute changes for his mother to be upset about, but rather than asking he just shrugged and began setting the table for six.

Just then, a pair of headlights moved across the kitchen wall, and they heard the hum of a car in the driveway. Despite knowing that the chances of it being Aunt Alison were nil, Daniel felt a short rush of excitement. In a year in which spending time with his family seemed more of

a chore than something to get excited about, Aunt Alison's arrival had been the one thing that he had been looking forward to. He ran to open the kitchen door then, disappointed to see it was just his older sister, closed it again.

A couple of minutes later, Dawn stormed in and nearly fell over her duffel bag and the two J.C. Penny bags full of gifts she had just hauled from the car. "Thanks a lot for the help, butthead," she murmured breathlessly to Daniel.

"Sorry," he replied dismissively. "Didn't think you'd have any luggage considering you live five minutes away."

Ten years of solid abuse from her had defined their sibling relationship. Since he gotten big enough to fight back, however, they had been in a sort of Cold War truce founded on mutually assured disregard. While the six months since Dawn had moved out of the house and into a squalid little apartment with four other nineteen-year-olds had proven to be a blissful period for Daniel, Hannah complained incessantly about her big sister's absence. The five-year-old came charging into the kitchen from the living room and smashed into her sister's leg with a squeal of "Maychrimmas, Maychrimmas!"

"Lemme get in the door, squirt!" said Dawn. Hannah took a Penny's bag and started to drag it to the other room.

Dawn stopped and greeted her mother and Aunt Roseanne with hugs and kisses. After diplomatically kissing the air in the general vicinity of Daniel's cheek, she told him to go get her other bag from the front seat of the car. Daniel undiplomatically pretended not to hear her as he riffled through the *TV Guide* that lay atop the stack of that day's mail.

"Help your sister, will you?" his mother snapped, grabbing the magazine and smacking him upside the head with it. Daniel sighed and slunk off toward the door.

“Just take it up to my room,” Dawn shouted back as she took the rest of the gifts to the tree.

“*Her* room?” Daniel moaned. “Where am I supposed to sleep then, huh? Why’s it always *me* that gets pushed out?”

“You can stay in Hannah’s room tonight,” said his mother. “We’ll have to shuffle a bit again tomorrow once Alison’s here.”

“Fine,” Daniel huffed. “I’ll just stay on the couch then.”

“Tonight,” Marion insisted, “you have to stay on the trundle bed in Hannah’s room.”

“Ha ha, you have to sleep in the chickenpox room!” Dawn sang mockingly as she returned to the kitchen.

“Hey!” yelled Hannah, who was hanging from Dawn’s neck.

“But why can’t I just sleep on the couch?”

“Not on Christmas eve...” Marion motioned with her head to Hannah, but Daniel still didn’t get it.

“*Um, Santa Claus, dummy?*” Dawn said in a loud whisper.

“Eh?” The others eyed him urgently. Even Hannah dropped to the floor and nodded sagely at him. “Oh, right,” said Daniel, catching on at last. “Of course. How can Santa leave the presents if I’m... Right. Guess I’m staying in the chickenpox room then.” He threw up his arms in defeat. For all his self-sacrifice, Dawn laughed in his face again. Without another word, he left to get her bag and take it up to *her* room.

A short while later, Ed returned from the grocery store with a bag of last-minute holiday groceries and a few others goodies. He threw a packet of candy canes to Hannah and told her to go put them on the Christmas tree. As soon as the family sat down to dinner, Aunt Roseanne began

ribbing her nephew. “So, Daniel, how’s the love life?” She punctuated the embarrassing question with a patronizing aunty tweak on the cheek. “Any pretty girls at school?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Dawn with mock eagerness. “What about your little friend you took to Homecoming?”

Daniel could feel his face turn red with a combination of discomfiture and anger. “I see you’ve honed your condescension skills since you moved out,” he fired back.

“Oh,” gasped Marion, “you should see the poems he wrote. They’re just *lovely!*”

Daniel turned now on her. “How do *you* know about them?” he snapped in a sharply accusatory tone.

“They were only sitting out for a week on the desk in the hallway, Daniel,” she replied.

“You should see them,” Dawn cackled. “They’re hilarious!”

“Shut up,” Daniel mumbled through a mouthful of creamy green bean casserole.

“I didn’t see them...” Hannah said regretfully.

“You haven’t talked about Lauren much at all lately,” Marion observed.

“Laura,” he corrected. “Jesus, Mom. *Laura.*”

“Well, I don’t know,” she said.

“He only went around mooning about her for months,” Dawn moaned.

As she took a bite of mashed potatoes a look of puzzlement crossed his mother’s face.

“Don’t you like her anymore?”

“Well.” Daniel paused for a long moment, thinking, then said: “No. I don’t.”

“Why, what happened?” his mother persisted.

“I don’t know, Mom.” He rolled his eyes to express again his infinite impatience with her incessant questions. “They say your tastes change every seven years.”

“You kids,” she said. “Jeez, when Dawn was your age, it was a new boy every week.”

“Wonderful, Mom! Thanks for making me sound like a slut.” Dawn rolled her eyes.

“Don’t speak that way at the dinner table!” Marion snapped. “You *know* that’s not what I meant. Jeez, you two are so sensitive.”

Teenage disaffect hovered over the table as a visible fog.

“What’s a slut?” Hannah asked.

“Does anyone want more biscuits?” asked Ed preemptively before completely changing the subject.

During the course of the conversation, they moved on to the topic of the buildup in the Gulf. Operation Desert Shield was in full swing, and hundreds of thousands of American military personnel stood ready to defend the Hama oilfields against an Iraqi attack. Just three weeks before Christmas, the United Nations had sent Saddam an ultimatum, and anxiety about a possible war was building. Everyone in the country was keeping an eye on CNN to find out what would happen between the holidays and the fifteenth of January.

“I don’t see what they’re waiting for,” Marion conjectured. “Just bomb the Saudis and get it over with.”

“Mom,” Daniel groaned, “the Saudis are our *allies*.”

“That’s what we’re doing there,” Ed explained to his wife more patiently. “It’s a wall of troops to protect them.”

“I know that!” Marion said defensively. “Still, why do *we* have to get involved? All those people over there, they should all just be allowed to kill each other and get it over with.”

Daniel nearly choked on a chunk of ham. “Jesus, Mom!”

“*Your mother has never had much of a subtle take on politics,*” Aunt Roseanne leaned in

to whisper to Dawn and Daniel.

“The whole thing is a big mistake,” said Daniel.

“For once, I actually agree with you,” Dawn added. “You know how many of my friends are going to end up going over there—and possibly *dying* over there?”

“They could still come up with a diplomatic solution if they tried,” Daniel continued.

“Ah, young people love to imagine everything can be solved without a conflict.

Everything is just peace and love,” said Aunt Roseanne. A sardonic smile crept onto her lips.

“Just wait till you get older, then you’ll see.”

“You can’t reason with a dictator,” Ed added with a nod.

“Yeah, then we’ll end up in a quagmire over there. It’ll be another Vietnam!” Daniel yelled.

In fact, Daniel knew very little about the conflict. Still, that Christmas Eve, his own ignorance on the matter did not mitigate his indignation toward theirs. With Dawn as his unlikely ally, Daniel led the teen faction against the adults in a grueling battle that would last all the way through dessert. Their brave and honorable goal: to show their elders once and for all how horribly stupid and ill-informed they were.

“All right, all right!” Ed shouted as the last salvos were fired over plates of pumpkin pie. “Enough!” he yelled at Daniel, who was shouting down his mother. “I said enough!” he insisted to Dawn, who was pleading with Aunt Roseanne to see her point of view. “Now, it’s Christmas Eve. It’s no time to be sitting around bickering. So let’s all just relax and enjoy each other’s company, huh?”

And with that, a truce was settled. They joined forces to clear the table, then regrouped in the living room to take part in the yuletide tradition that would reunite them: watching videos of

classic Christmas specials while the adults enjoyed some spiked eggnog. Throughout *The Grinch* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, Hannah lay on the carpet between Daniel and Dawn, who took turns kicking each other over their sister while trying not to attract the attention of their parents. In the end it was Hannah who yelled at them to knock it off.

Staring blankly at the television, Daniel began to feel down about their quiet Christmas Eve. Maybe he would have felt differently if Aunt Alison had made it there that night. He certainly hoped that he would be more enthusiastic once she arrived. For the next hour, he sat with his family watching television, silently brooding until it was time to go to bed.

After a trip to the bathroom, Daniel quietly slipped into Hannah's room—the infamous “chickenpox room” that has served as an infirmary before Hannah had been born and where, as children, both he and Dawny had been held in quarantine each time they brought home a new disease from school. His mother had prepared the trundle bed for him. He tiptoed past Hannah and started to turn down the covers.

“*Santa here?*” she whispered.

“Hey, how's he supposed to come if you're still awake?” He could hear her kick her feet under the covers with excitement. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he leaned over in the half-darkness and, trying at least to play along, whispered to her: “*You know what, though? They said on the news that a sleigh and some reindeer were spotted over Boston, right around where Aunt Alison lives.*” Hannah gave a little squeal of delight in response.

Daniel realized that he had left his pajamas and some clothes for the next day in Dawn's room, and with a frustrated sigh he left again to get them.

“*Where you going?*” Hannah asked.

“*Just go to sleep, squirt,*” he said, closing the door gently behind him.

In the hallway, he was just about to barge into Dawn's room when he heard his sister and Aunt Roseanne speaking softly within. He stopped to listen for a moment through the closed door. He'd never known the two of them to speak conspiratorially, and he wondered if it had something to do with a gift, perhaps for his mother or Hannah. Aunt Roseanne mentioned meeting someone named David, but Daniel couldn't make sense of the rest of what she said. He knocked on the door. Although Aunt Roseanne's falsetto "Yes?" seemed invitation enough to enter, the two of them looked surprised when he opened the door.

Dawn jumped up from the edge of her bed and slipped what appeared to be airline tickets into the large jewelry box on her dresser. "Just barge in, why don't you!" she barked. Aunt Roseanne joined her in scowling at Daniel.

"I *did* knock, you know," said Daniel. "I need to get my stuff."

"Fine," said Dawn, a little flushed now. "Get it and go to bed then."

"What's *your* problem anyway?"

"We were just having a little private discussion," said Aunt Roseanne tersely.

"Okay, great," said Daniel, laying on plenty of sarcasm to counter their strange moodiness. "Well, enjoy your 'little discussion.' " He closed the door behind him loudly and stalked back to the chickenpox room, muttering under his breath about being made a vagrant in his own home.

By the time he got back to Hannah's room, he found that she was either asleep or doing such a good job of faking it that St. Nick himself would have been fooled. He could see by the dim glow of her nightlight that she had the faintest trace of a smile still on her face, and he could practically hear the sugarplums doing time steps in her head.

Then as he lay down to go to sleep himself, he heard from downstairs, from the far side

of the house, the soft jingle of sleigh bells. Hannah sprang from her bed like a flash. She started whispering “*Santasantasantasanta*” so fast that it sounded like she was speaking in tongues.

“*Shhhhh*,” Daniel urged her. “*You don’t want him to know you’re not asleep, do you?*”

Hannah flung herself back onto her pillow and threw the blanket over her head. As the jingling bells continued, they heard a muffled *hohoho*. Hannah responded with a mad peal of giggles and squeals; she had to hold the sides of her bed to keep from running out the door. They waited for several minutes but heard nothing more.

Over the next half hour, Daniel opened his eyes every few minutes and looked across the room to make sure Hannah had not run down after Santa. The first few times she lay back with her eyes clenched shut as she tried to will herself to sleep. Soon she had stopped wiggling her feet beneath her covers, and then her eyes relaxed, her breathing slowed, and Daniel knew that she was asleep for real this time. Who would have thought that a five-year-old could snore like that? he wondered.

Unlike his little sister, Daniel continued to toss and turn in the semi-dark. He could hardly sleep, and not because it was Christmas Eve and not because of his sister’s piglet-like noises. It occurred to him that this must have been the first time that even Hannah’s agonizing impatience for the big day failed to make the holiday seem magical to him. In fact, he lay there in bed wishing that he could take back his Christmas list, cancel the order and tell everyone he wanted nothing from them that year. He wished he’d never asked for anything at all, that he were beyond all need or desire. He didn’t know why he felt that way, but the inexplicable emptiness he felt inside made him want to negate everything.

After about an hour, he heard his parents sneak up to their room. Still unable to sleep, he

resolved to get up and go downstairs. He went to the living room, flicked on the television, and watched it until he inadvertently fell asleep on the couch.

o o o

Aunt Alison arrived just before noon on Christmas morning. By about ten o'clock Hannah, riding a vicious sugar high from an early morning eggnog overdose, couldn't take it anymore and absolutely *had* to have a present to open. Despite Marion's protestations, Dawn slipped her little sister a couple of stocking stuffers to keep her head from exploding. The Pez dispensers and packages of fun twisty straws gave Hannah enough of a fix to make it till midday, but she did not really relax until Aunt Alison walked in the door with a casserole dish on one arm and a large bag of presents on the other. "Finally!" Hannah cheered. "*Now* we can have Christmas!"

The sight of Aunt Alison coming through the door gave Daniel the first feeling of joy he'd felt the entire holiday season. He rushed to the kitchen to help her with her things, then gave her a big hug and a kiss. He even ran out to the car in his pajamas and slippers to get her other bags.

Marion invited Alison to have a cup of coffee and relax for a moment after the long drive. But Aunt Alison, taking Hannah up into a bear hug, protested: "Oh, but can't you see this little darling is about to pop a gasket?" Hannah nodded vigorously in agreement. Without further ado, Aunt Alison led them into the living room and handed her niece the first of many presents.

"Stockings first!" Ed shouted over the commotion of the sisters' questions and the children's excited chatter. He pulled them down from the mantel above the faux fireplace and handed them out. Having stripped her first victim and gutted it of its contents—footy pajamas—Hannah hollered a perfunctory "Thank you" and proceeded to dump the contents of her stocking

on the floor and pick through them with the speed and efficiency of a cannery worker. Daniel and Dawn grabbed their stockings, too, and claimed adjacent territories on the carpet near the tree. Ed took up his Santa's hat and began digging through the presents, preparing to distribute them.

As they sat side by side on the couch, the family resemblance the three sisters bore became even more pronounced. Like most of the women on the Haley side of the family, their Irish lineage was clearly expressed in their high, sharp cheeks, their pale blue-green eyes, and their large ball-tipped noses, which stood like exclamation points above a colorless dash of a mouth. Their long-fingered, knobby knuckled hands would have been mannish but for the feminine grace that attends all things delicate and pale. While Marion was still relatively slim and her prettiness remained mostly unmarred by wrinkles, Roseanne's cornhusk hair had lost its sheen and her long, jowly face made her seem older than her years. And Aunt Alison had grown noticeably grayer than she had been during her last visit. Now in her mid-fifties, she had mellowed to autumn plumpness and was starting to look a little less like her younger sisters and more like one of the elderly aunts of the Haley clan.

Despite her age—there was eleven years' difference between her and Roseanne, fourteen between her and Marion—Aunt Alison was still remarkably youthful. Something of a black sheep, she had always struck Daniel as the most lively and interesting person in their family. Indeed, he admired her for being the only one among them with any real culture. She had been places, seen things. She had traveled the world, and not just on cruises and bus tours. She had lived in other countries and even spoke a few languages. And she was an artist: alongside her sketchbooks she kept a journal that she would sometimes read to them on her visits. Since his early childhood, Daniel had been fascinated by his aunt's adventures. Without having ever been anywhere, he

implicitly shared her wanderlust.

Year after year, Aunt Alison's gifts were the most interesting and most cherished at Christmas. Not only did she always manage to find something personal, she also had impeccable taste. Marion was delighted with her new pair of authentic gemstone earrings from Thailand, and Roseanne knew at once the perfect niche in her house in which to hang the Balinese mask Alison had gotten her. Amid the deluge of toys and clothes dumped upon Hannah, the pop-up Egyptology book full of mummies, scarabs, and hieroglyphics that Aunt Alison had picked up for her at the Louvre stood out as exotic and exciting. The elegant ruby necklace she had found at a market in Bangkok brought tears to Dawn's eyes, and the Biermeister Brew Kit she'd found in Allston for Ed nearly brought tears to his. Finally, the leather-bound journal with thick creamy pages and faint blue lines (exactly like the one she'd given him the year before) as well as a handsome set of watercolors, acrylics, and art markers—all of which she had found on the rue Saint Placide—proved yet again that she knew her favorite nephew very well indeed. After opening his presents, Daniel rose to give her warm kiss on the cheek and thank her sincerely for the best gifts he would receive that year.

Once all the presents had been unwrapped, Hannah announced “Christmas is over” before flopping onto her heap of booty for a well-earned nap. Marion returned to the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee and check on the dishes she'd started preparing that morning. Their official Christmas dinner was twice the size of the previous evening's meal. They still had over half the ham left to finish, and Marion had made an enormous turkey with stuffing and gravy, cranberry sauce, and more, and there were Aunt Alison's candied yams covered in toasted mini-marshmallows, to boot.

Now that she was “on her own” (she'd moved all of five miles away from her parents),

Dawn was working overtime to put on adult airs. As Ed rounded the table pouring wine for himself, his wife, and her sisters, Dawn requested a glass for herself. She countered her mother's "Not in this house!" swiftly and effortlessly with a confident: "Mother, I'm a woman now, and I'm capable of drinking a glass of wine responsibly."

"Woman!" Daniel choked back a guffaw. The image of Dawn covered in mud, banging on his bedroom window at three in the morning after having drunkenly clamored up the drainpipe in the rain, flashed through Daniel's mind. Never mind the stories she had told him of how awesome it had been to do keg stands in her new backyard last Halloween.

Aunt Roseanne surprised everyone by taking up Dawn's defense and extolling the virtues of French culture (she'd done a whirlwind bus tour of several European capitals the year before). "You know, they *all* let their children drink wine over there. If you ask me, it's perfectly natural for a young woman of her age... This is how they learn responsible drinking habits." Having no children of her own, she felt more than confident giving out free parenting advice.

"Do you know how many alcoholics there are in France, dear?" Aunt Alison adjoined. "A lot more than here, I tell you."

Dawn went into full-on sulk mode. "Mom and dad have this, like, complete inability to believe that I could ever be, you know, a mature and responsible adult." Marion cleared her throat, and Ed suppressed a smile. "C'mon! Just a little sip!" Dawn whined, holding her glass out and bouncing in her seat.

"I want some, too!" yelled Hannah. "Please, please, please!"

"*Now* look" was Marion's closing argument on the matter. "You get milk, Hannah. And so does Dawny." Ed sat on the far side of the table with the bottle of wine.

"Here, dear," said Aunt Roseanne softly, "have mine." She pushed her glass over to

Dawn and pretended not to notice Marion's glares.

Aunt Alison leaned over to ask Daniel how school had been going that year. He wished he could have opened the floodgates and told her everything that had happened since October, but fearing a reprise of the previous evening's conversation he tried instead to find the least personal detail to talk about in front of the others. So he told her how excited he was to start Driver's Education in spring as part of his second semester gym class. In truth, he was not particularly "excited" to spend time in a smelly old station wagon with Coach Stambaugh screaming at him to use his blinker, but the possibility of being able to drive by summertime was something to look forward to.

"Till then," Ed noted, "we're his personal taxi service, aren't we, Daniel? 'Take me to play practice!' 'Drop me off at *Denny's!*' 'I wanna go to *Wonder Book!*' "

"You didn't even *let* me take Driver's Ed till eleventh grade!" Dawn interjected. "How come Daniel gets to take it now?"

"Because *he* isn't struggling in half his classes this year," Ed answered.

"So unfair!" Dawn moaned.

Daniel rolled his eyes. "Get over it."

"You didn't need any other distractions," Ed concluded.

Aunt Alison put her arm around Dawn and pulled her close to calm her down. "Well, you can't expect to be much more than a taxi service for a while," she told Ed. "At a certain age parents become just those strangers amidst whom we're born and who we keep kindly on the radar as we move out into the world... For a while, you have to settle for being in the background of their lives. Then, if you're lucky, they get a little older and let you back in."

"How's Ruth doing now?" Marion asked cautiously.

“Better, much better...” said Alison.

“I wish she’d come down with you,” said Dawn sadly, resting her head for a moment on Alison’s shoulder. Ruth had long been a kind of ersatz older sister to Dawn, and for years they had spent holidays huddled together in girl talk.

“I do, too,” said Alison. “But it’s better that she and Oscar spend this week together. This trip is huge for him, and I think it’ll do a lot for her, too. It’s taken a long time, but it seems like she’s finally accepting him as a father figure. Not as a father, mind you, but at least as a father figure.”

The table fell quiet for a long moment before Ed broke the silence by offering everyone more turkey. Marion passed the large platter to Roseanne, and they seemed to share a knowing look. Marion took up her napkin and gave it a strong twist, then cleared her throat.

“Listen, Al,” she began, “since you’re here for a few days, I was thinking— *We* were thinking it would be nice if you—”

Alison dropped her fork loudly on her plate. “Don’t... even... start.”

“You haven’t even heard what I’m going to say!” said Marion.

“Oh, I know what you’re going to say, and I am *not* going up there.”

“Well,” said Marion, “I’m sick and tired of being the only one who does.”

“The only one?” Roseanne interjected testily. “Didn’t I go up this weekend with you? Haven’t I sent checks? Believe me, I would come up more often if I could, but with my health!” There was a collective sigh amongst the adult contingent at the table. Roseanne turned to Alison. “I understand where you’re coming from, dearie. I feel the same way you do, but Marion has a point. I swear to God, the woman is losing her mind up there all by herself. Losing Bill has just—”

“Not to sound insensitive,” Alison jumped in again, “but Dolores lost her mind ages ago—in fact, she’s been a borderline personality as long as I’ve known her. I don’t think I need to remind anyone what her last words to me were...” She reset the napkin in her lap. “Besides, frankly, I’ve lost *three* husbands myself, and despite ample opportunity, I don’t recall her ever rushing over to console me.”

Daniel had not seen his maternal grandmother in almost two years—not since the death of his Grandpa Bill. He remembered the chubby old woman as being rather soul-shriveled and ill tempered, prone to sudden racist remarks (more than once Daniel had heard her refer to Uncle Oz as “that dirty old Jew,” and she was no friend to any black person who wasn’t already her friend), as miserable as her name implied, and more than a touch batty. Most of his mother’s family had cut off all contact with her long ago, each of them having been spited or slighted in his or her turn. Even Marion had broken off contact for a spell before reconnecting around the time of her second divorce. It was the enlightened opinion of the granddames of the family—the Supreme Court of elderly great-aunts that ruled on all disputes and determined the final version of intrafamilial gossip—that it had been the death of Dolores’s only boy, Francis, in Vietnam that pushed her to the edge of cracking up. Her husband Bill’s death, they said, had sent her over it.

“But she loved him so much,” said Marion with tears in her eyes.

“Please!” howled Alison. “I practically begged her to put Bill in a nursing home or get a girl to take care of him. For Chrissakes, the last time I was over there, he was shitting out his rectum!” She touched Hannah lightly on the shoulder. “Pardon my language... It was quite literally—it was so awful—I mean *quite* literally hanging out of the end of him. And I pleaded with that woman to take him to a hospital. I had to push it back in *myself*, and I damn near had to

hold her down while Oz got Bill out to the car. If it had been up to Dolores, Bill would have died years ago.”

“It’s a surprise she didn’t *peck* him to death long before that,” Roseanne added.

“Oh, she tried,” said Alison with a sarcastic chuckle. “Trust me, she tried. The cancer just got him first.”

Marion sighed. “Don’t you think you’re being a bit—”

“No, I do *not*,” Alison returned strongly. “I really don’t. And if you expect me to rush over to console that woman—”

“Your *mother!*” Marion corrected.

“*Your* mother... Well, I won’t.”

They took a moment to catch their breath. Then Marion explained apologetically: “You just seem to be a little harsh, is all.”

“For your information, I’m not,” said Alison. “She was a nasty person long before *you* met her, Marion. She was a terrible mother to you and Roseanne.”

“And to you?” asked Roseanne, raising her eyebrows as she lit a cigarette.

“Please don’t smoke at the dinner table,” Ed said to her softly, as though a little afraid to insinuate himself in the Haley sisters’ argument. Even through her big black space goggles one could see that Roseanne rolled her eyes as she snubbed the cigarette out on her bread plate.

“I was the first,” Alison explained, “so I can excuse her being a bad parent to me. But you’d think she’d have gotten the hang of it the second or—Jesus!—the third time around... Do you remember that time, Roseanne, when Marion fell down on the pavement and put her teeth through her lip? It was in the driveway of the house on Clark Street. Little Marion, all of three years old, fell flat on her face and had that horrid look in her eyes of a little girl positively about

to explode with tears. And mother, rather than consoling her, yanks her up by her little arm and shouts at her—‘Don’t you hurt what *I* made!’ ”

“Oh, come on,” Marion moaned, “she did not!”

“No. No, I remember it clear as day. One of the rare instances of her actually being around to abuse her children.”

“Why’d Grandma Dell leave you with Auntie Ellie for so long anyway?” Dawn asked. Her brow was furrowed in concentration, and she sipped her wine seriously. Roseanne and Marion looked at her as though her presence—which they’d seemed to have forgotten along with everybody else’s during their several minutes of heated discussion—came to them as a great surprise. Their realization turned into a mutual, ornery look of “None of your business.”

Alison, however, was more accommodating of inquisitive young women. She let out a roar of laughter and smacked the table with her open palm. “You’re grandmother was a chippie, dear!” she howled. “A *real* chippie!”

“Don’t tell them that!” Marion protested.

But Roseanne was nodding in reluctant agreement. “Please! You remember Uncle Peanut... What do you think *he* was up to?”

“He wasn’t paying the rent for nothin’, sweetheart,” added Alison bawdily. “So while Dell was running around town, for four years us girls lived with Great-aunt Ellie. I was already working by then, but the two of them had to go to the Sacred Heart Academy in Washington.” (Like a true native, she pronounced it *Wershington*.)

“Never mind that we were Presbyterian,” Roseanne added.

“Papa was a Lutheran, dear,” Alison corrected. “And so was Nana, and that’s what Dell was raised. Obviously it didn’t stick.”

“Whatever we were,” Roseanne continued scornfully, “the Catholics were willing take us for cheap.” Alison nodded in confirmation.

“You know,” said Marion absently, “I still dream about hitting those nuns back.” She and Roseanne let out great big roars of laughter.

“Oh, Lord, if there’s anything to give a person a distaste for religion,” said Roseanne, “it’s the nuns of the Sacred Heart Academy...”

Alison sighed and patted her mouth with her napkin. “We really do have our entire childhood to hold against that woman.”

“Well,” said Marion, “forgive and forget, right?”

“No thank you!” This Alison practically yelled across the table as she threw her napkin down. She met Marion’s look of surprise with a steady gaze and a furrowed brow. “It took thousands of dollars and half a dozen shrinks—from Freudians to Jungians to I-don’t-know-what-elseians—but finally, at the ripe old age of fifty-four, I’ve come to accept never forgiving Dolores Haley Schiller Hausman for my childhood. There was a *reason* I married Walt Baughman, lo, these many years ago—God rest the son of a bitch’s soul... To get out of that house, Marion! To get out of her control. To get *away* from her.” Alison calmed down again and rested back in her seat a little. “Only problem was I *kept* doing it... Took me four husbands to realize it was really Dell I was running from.”

A long silence followed. Then Marion let out a little sarcastic laugh through her nose. “Isn’t *this* a pleasant Christmas dinner?” she said softly.

Alison sighed and let the tension relax for a moment. She leaned over and took the hands of her two sisters. “You two were a lot smarter than me in that regard.”

Another aspect the Haley girls shared was a proclivity for multiple marriages—not all at

once, of course, nor usually for the same reasons, which ranged from a low life expectancy for Haley husbands (partially explained by the fact that so many of them were military men) to a persistent habit among Haley girls to choose men that were in no way good for them.

Daniel had a vague picture in his mind of their sprawling and broken-branched family tree. Once, during a long drive up north to visit Ed Kenning's family, as they lay in the back of the truck with the cap's divider separating them from their parents, Dawn had entertained herself by attempting to narrate to Daniel in meticulous detail the whole twisted history of Haley marriages and divorces. Daniel was still unsure whether Dawn's version was accurate or whether she had merely invented answers to his many questions, for the exaggerated harlequin romance quality of it all seemed more the product of a teenage girl's imagination. Yet many parts, even some of the juiciest and most unbelievable, had later been corroborated by dinnertime arguments between his mother and aunts or by snatches of gossip overheard during visits to his many great-aunts.

The details of Aunt Alison's five marriages were common knowledge amongst family members, and Alison herself talked about them without compunction. Ten years before, she had wed Oscar Loew, a plumbing-supplies salesman from Boston. Despite the stir their marriage had caused amongst the elder matrons, which had led to Alison breaking off all contact with her mother, their lasting love for each other and Oscar's relative longevity had made her marriage to Uncle Oz her longest yet. Daniel had only a few vague childhood memories of Oscar's predecessor, Hilaire Lindeman, a French aviator whom Alison had met in Tunisia and with whom she was briefly married before his Cessna 172 Skyhawk went down in a winter storm outside Montreal. Alison openly admitted that her elopement with Marine Sergeant Walter Baughman had been merely a tactic to escape from her mother's house, and she often joked she'd set a trend in the family. The short-lived union had brought her to Asia for the first time

and had ended when Walter ran off with a young Korean nurse named Soon-Yi. (“You’d think I’d have been upset,” she would always say when retelling the story, “but to tell the truth, I’ve never been more relieved than the day I received that silly ‘dear John’ letter of his. God, Walt had atrocious penmanship—the writing skills of a third-grader!”) But twenty years later they had become good friends again back in the States, and she had even attended Walt’s funeral when he passed away in 1988. Her second marriage, to Henry “Hal” Harford, stood a better chance at lasting, but it ended when Hal died of peritonitis caused by a surgical sponge left in his abdomen during a routine hernia operation. His death devastated Alison, but the settlement in the malpractice suit that followed allowed her to devote herself completely to her painting. Her subsequent husbands were told that they would just have to get used to the picture of “old Hal” that hung in perpetuity on the wall of her studio space wherever she happened to be living. Alison’s third husband, Henry Holbrock, remained a close friend. “Henry II,” as those in the family who talked about him at all preferred to call him, had scandalized the family by coming out of the closet shortly after he and Alison announced that she was pregnant with their daughter, Ruth. In the aftermath of Hal’s death, Alison confessed, she had worried about the possibility of never having baby. Even before the wedding, she had been well aware of Holbrock’s dalliances with a young corporal at the Officer’s Club on the base in England where they were stationed. But Henry shared her commitment to their child, she had all she needed, and the two of them loved each other deeply as friends if not as man and wife. But when she met Oscar, she could no longer continue her sham marriage. “It’s funny,” she would say, “it would never have occurred to us back then that you didn’t need to get married to have a child. If I’d realized this—good Lord, if I’d only known!—I probably would’ve had *zero* husbands instead of five.” But she was happy now with Uncle Oz, she said, and provided he did not beat a hasty exit by kicking the

bucket, it was more than likely they would spend the rest of their lives together.

Roseanne's marriages were a topic of frequent, if not open, conversation. Given the family's perception of Roseanne as sensitive to the point of psychic fragility, it had become taboo to speak of her past in anything louder than a whisper, even when she was not there. Theodore Richter had been *her* ticket out of the house in 1965. Her sisters and aunts were in accord that the prospect of getting out from under her mother's thumb had blinded her to Teddy's manipulative nature and violent tendencies, his incurable shiftlessness, and the early signs of his developing alcoholism. Thankfully, within five years they had divorced. Over the next ten years, though, Roseanne fell into a pattern of dating other aggressive and controlling men, men without prospects, men who exploited her gullibility and submissiveness, and this pattern culminated in a disastrous second marriage to William Hillsdale. Though Bill (the fact that he shared a name with the sisters' stepfather was often cited as a sign of Roseanne's catastrophic search for a father figure in her relationships) was the most successful man she'd ever been with, he was also the most demanding and destructive. Lasting a mere three years, the marriage had been a rope-a-dope affair from the start, and it had ended in tears for Roseanne, who walked away with nothing. She lost her house and her car in the divorce, and as a result of her deep depression that followed she lost her job and more than a few friends. For years afterwards, there had been a general fear amongst the granddames of the Haley clan—her elderly aunts Angela and Mary, and ancient Aunt Millicent who seemed determined to live forever, whose endless speculations about their younger relatives had all the finality of the pronouncements of a Politburo—that “Roseanne might do something rash.” (They would never have been so blunt as to suggest that she would commit suicide.) Their concern was not unfounded, however. One night while driving home from a session with her therapist, Roseanne crashed her station wagon into a

divider on route 40, just outside Durham. The car was totaled, and Roseanne wore a neck brace for months. “It’s that damn medicine they have me on,” she’d claimed—this was during the early craze for Prozac. “They got me so hopped up on goofballs I can’t see straight. I should sue the whole lot of ’em—from my therapist on down to the pharmacist that gives me the stuff.” But many in the family strongly suspected the accident was an attempted vehicular suicide. It had taken the better part of a decade, but Roseanne was finally moving past her marriages. The family’s whispering about her had drifted from worried rumors to excited klatch about her finding a new man to a sustained note of concern that Roseanne would never find another husband. More recently, the judgment of the great-aunts had come down that, beyond a shadow of a doubt, if she didn’t “shake off her blues for good” Roseanne would remain alone for the rest of her days.

Then there was Marion, the baby of the family, who at the age of forty was seven years into her third marriage. Like Roseanne, she was secretive about her past, and she brushed off inquiries with a seemingly light but clearly annoyed “What’s it matter? It’s all water under the bridge anyway.” Daniel often wondered whether Aunt Alison was so open about her ex-husbands because half of them were dead, and whether his mother was so silent about hers because all of them were still out there somewhere. Marion’s three children each had a different father. In 1974—she’d already had Dawny at that point—she met a young officer named Alan Dorn. After six years together, half of them spent in Germany, they separated and were divorced the following year. Despite several dim memories of his own from that period—brief flashes of New England winters, of playing in piles of leaves in autumn—what Daniel remembered most clearly about Alan Dorn was his frequent absences. Though Daniel glanced occasionally at the old photos he’d found in the rolltop desk, his mental image of his father had grown quite fuzzy over the past decade. His memories of the period immediately following the divorce were much stronger: the

Happy Meals and games of Uno on the trip down to Grandma Dell's house; the pocketknife inscribed with Alan Dorn's initials that had briefly been in Daniel's possession; the pile of letters addressed to him that he'd discovered in his mother's drawer in the old townhouse. But while he had the keyhole of his own experience to gaze through to view his mother's second marriage (and an open window on her third), Daniel knew next to nothing about her first. For like her sisters, Marion, too, had had her escape hatch. "David Anselm" was a name Daniel had never heard his mother say; indeed, he knew it only from his sister. Even Dawn rarely mentioned this David Anselm; the name had stuck in Daniel's mind precisely because of the mystery surrounding it and because it had been preceded by the words "my father" in Dawn's car-trip genealogy. In fact, he had been so shocked by the phrase—"my father, David Anselm"—that he had let slip away what he thought might have been his only chance to ask more questions about the man. The rest of his mother's life—the part that Daniel had been around for—was, of course, no mystery. He remembered vividly the details of his mother's courtship with her lucky number three, Edward Evelyn Kenning, the man who was famous in their family for having walked two miles through driven snow just to shovel their walkway during the great Blizzard of 1983 and who had won by a landslide the family's nomination to be their New Husband and Dad in the teary election held on Marion's bed two days later.

As Daniel thought through these many details, an odd fact occurred to him. With the sole exception of Hannah, everyone on his mother's side of the family, from his grandma Dell down, had had to adjust to at least one divorce and remarriage. Dolores Haley had herself married twice: once to a young Army lieutenant, Stephen Schiller, who after knocking up a ripe Georgia Peach on a jaunt to the Carolinas never returned to his wife and four children up north, and a second time to a Navy captain who had lost a leg in Korea and who, two years before, had died

of colon cancer. During their teenage years, Roseanne and Marion had accepted peg-legged Bill Hausman as their father, and over time they'd grown closer to him than they'd ever been to their mother. Alison, who'd fled the house almost four years before her mother's second marriage, had never fully come back into the fold. Daniel's cousin Ruth had grown up with a succession of men in her home and, so they'd just been told, was only now coming to accept Oscar. Daniel's sister Dawn had been asked to accept the paternity of Alan Dorn during their years abroad in Germany. And only a few years later both she and Daniel had accepted the paternity of Ed Kenning (something they'd done completely and without hesitation the moment their mother asked them whether they approved of his proposal). Since then Ed had become as much their "dad" as he was Hannah's. Daniel was not unhappy with the way things had turned out. Oddly enough, it seemed to him that it had all turned out for the best for everyone except Aunt Roseanne. But he wondered whether other families had so many skeletons in their closets, so many problems in their pasts, so many mysteries and secrets. And he wondered again at how the tangle of accidents, mistakes, and mishaps—this strange mess called "family" that stretched beyond the memory of anyone involved—ever managed to stay together in the first place, much less continue on.

"Listen," Aunt Alison was saying. "Don't think I don't appreciate all you do for her. But, speaking purely for myself, I just can't do it anymore."

"It's family," Marion muttered.

"Yes, and family is a wonderful institution," Alison began. Roseanne joined her in waggling an imaginary Groucho cigar: "But who wants to live in an institution?"

"Anyway, Marion," Alison concluded, "I must say you've had the best luck of us all with this family business." She raised her glass toward Ed. Dawn eagerly took up the toast.

Ed grinned and winked. “Haha, I’m the lucky one.” He raised his glass and turned to smile at his wife. As though coming out of a trance, Marion shook her head slightly and clinked glasses with him. Then, as though clearing the last remnants of the conversation, Ed rose and took up a few nearby plates. “Dessert everybody?” The moment he left the room with an armful of plates, Roseanne lit up again and began smoking her cigarette as fast as she could.

As he was still ruminating about the lives of his aunts, his mother, and his grandmother, these men called fathers, and the experiences of himself and his sisters, a detail from Dawn’s and Aunt Roseanne’s “little discussion” the night before sprang forth as though he had just yanked it out of the tangled mess of their family history. He glanced back and forth between Dawn and Aunt Roseanne. “Wait, David *Anselm*?” he blurted out.

When they both went dead white, Daniel knew in an instant that he had just said something dreadfully wrong.

“I’ll just help Ed with these,” said Roseanne. Half rising and fumbling blindly for a plate, she knocked over Dawn’s wineglass.

“Oh, my tablecloth!” Marion shouted. “Just let him get it!” she shouted. “Roseanne, let Ed get it.” She daubed the spill with a Christmas napkin as Roseanne pushed her chair back and reached around to snub out her cigarette again on the bread plate.

For a moment, Daniel thought maybe his question had gone unnoticed, or at the very least that they had been distracted from it. But when his mother took her seat again, a strange expression somewhere between fear and anger crossed her face. She looked at him and shook her head as though he’d just uttered an absurdity. “Now, what’s this, Daniel? What now?”

“What?” he asked stupidly. “Oh, no,” he said, “just the name... Uh, the name just popped into my head.”

Biting her lip, Dawn expended an extraordinary effort examining the bright red stain on the tablecloth.

“Dawn?” asked Marion.

“I didn’t say anything!” she said, glancing up then back down, as though afraid to meet her mother’s eyes.

Roseanne cleared her throat and said hoarsely, “Now, Marion—”

“Who’s David Handsome?” Hannah interrupted, her mouth stuffed with black olives from the bowl next to her.

The sisters were locked in tense stares, both Alison and Marion aiming their guns at Roseanne. Dawn had looked up from her plate and was glaring murderously at her brother.

“David Handsome, Handsome, Handsome,” Hannah started chanting. “Is he handsome, handsome, han—”

“Hannah!” Marion snapped as Ed walked back into the room, a bit stunned to find such a grave scene.

Aunt Alison gave Daniel a knowing look and nodded toward Hannah.

“Come on, squirt,” he said, grabbing his sister’s hand, “let’s go watch *Grinch* again.”

“I’m not finished!” she protested.

“Sure, you choose tonight to worry about finishing dinner...” He practically dragged her off her chair.

Aunt Roseanne continued cautiously: “Honey, let me just explain...” Then Ed closed the double doors behind them.

Hannah sat on the couch watching for the millionth time the antics of the Grinch stealing Christmas in the living room while David Anselm was somehow stealing it on the other side of

the dining room door. Daniel felt as though he'd just done something terrible, but he didn't know what precisely he had set in motion. Finally bored with the television, Hannah jumped up from the couch and came over to the doorway. "What are they doing in there?"

"*I don't know.*" After another minute of trying in vain to make out what they were saying, Daniel led Hannah partway up the staircase, where they waited nearly another half hour. Though he could make out the rise and fall of voices in the dining room, he learned nothing revealing from them.

Finally, the door flew open with a bang. "Well, merry fucking Christmas!" Dawn yelled.

"Dawn!" Ed shouted. Nothing followed it up.

Dawn made a beeline for the stairs, taking them two at a time. "Look out," she mumbled as she stomped past her siblings. Her eyes were puffy and red. A second later the house fairly shook when Dawn slammed her bedroom door.

Next Aunt Roseanne started heavily down the hall and up the stairs, looking like she'd just been dismissed from the principal's office. "*Just drop me off at the hotel,*" she snapped in a loud whisper. "*I don't want be the cause of any more trouble. I can get in the room by myself—*"

"*I told you I'd drive you back, and that's what I'm going to do,*" Aunt Alison replied calmly and even a bit wearily. "End of argument."

"Come on," said Daniel, pulling Hannah up by the back of her sweater. He charged into Dawn's room without knocking and demanded: "What the hell's going on?"

Dawn stopped shoving her clothes into her bag for an instant to glare at him. "Thanks a lot!"

"What?" Daniel whined. "I don't even—"

"You know what? Just shut up." Dawn turned her back on him and went to her jewelry

box to retrieve the airline tickets she'd put there the night before.

"Where you going, Dawny?" Hannah asked.

"Home."

"But where are you *going*?" Daniel asked.

Just outside the door, they could hear Aunt Roseanne rasping tartly: "Please, Alison,"—she gasped for breath and they heard the banister creak—"just leave me there. I'm not... one to ask... for more than I'm..." But in reaching the top of the steps she was too out of breath to reach the end of her sentence.

"Rosie!" Alison snapped. "Just get your things together!"

With heavy steps and wheezes, Aunt Roseanne passed the open doorway, a scowl on her beet-red face. Aunt Alison followed solemnly, her hands behind her back and her lips pursed in concentration. She stopped in the hall and flashed Daniel a weak smile, then entered with a soft courtesy knock on the doorframe.

She furrowed her brow in concentration as she crossed the room, coming up just behind Dawn. "It's not the end of the world, dear," she said in a gentle voice. "It's just going to take her some time to adjust."

Dawn was motionless for a moment. "It's like they think I'm still a little kid."

"She's just trying to protect you. And sometimes mothers keep trying even after their kids don't need it anymore."

"Well, I'm *not* a kid!" said Dawn. She wheeled around and yanked a sweater off the post of her bed. "I don't care what they say. I've got the ticket, and I'm going."

"All we're saying is take your time to think about it, okay?" said Aunt Alison, still in an even tone. "And be careful." She gave her niece a kiss on the cheek, and Dawn responded with a

reluctant hug.

Then Dawn pulled away abruptly and tossed her bag over her shoulder. She went to give Hannah a kiss. "See you, squirt."

"Taking your presents?" Hannah asked.

"I'll come back for them," said Dawn. But Hannah looked a little disappointed.

Without a word to her brother, Dawn walked out of the room. Daniel and Hannah went out after their older sister and watched between the banisters as she thumped downstairs again. As she stormed past the dining room, Ed and Marion both called for her to come talk some more. But she never so much as broke her stride. The front door slammed, and a moment later Dawn's car started in the driveway. Then she was gone.

Aunt Roseanne reappeared in the hallway, her face glistening with perspiration as though she'd been running on a treadmill in the bedroom. "Can I get some help in here?" she asked Daniel with dramatic exasperation. Without waiting for an answer, she squeezed past her niece and nephew to the stairs just as Aunt Alison emerged from Dawn's room with her coat over her arm.

Obediently, Daniel walked to his room and found that it had been ransacked of all things feminine. At the foot of his bed stood Aunt Roseanne's two large suitcases, packed and locked. Still with no idea of what was going on, Daniel lugged one then the other down to Aunt Alison's car, which was already warming up in the driveway by the time he loaded in the second suitcase.

During Roseanne's brief farewell to Hannah and Daniel, Marion stayed in the kitchen smoking the first (and second) cigarette she'd had in three years. Alison walked Roseanne through the dark to the car, and Daniel and Hannah watched out the window as Aunt Roseanne struggled get herself situated in the low seat. The sight of her wrestling with the seat belt to get it

over her midsection struck Daniel as grotesquely comical, and yet he did not have the slightest urge to laugh. He felt strangely sad for her, without knowing quite why or whether she deserved it. And then the headlights of the car flicked on. Roseanne managed to get the car door closed, and the two sisters drove away past the Coke machine on the corner and over the railroad tracks.

An hour later, Aunt Alison returned alone, having dropped Roseanne off at the Holiday Inn near the mall. Once Hannah had been tucked into bed, Daniel was at last told why his innocent question had caused such a stir: After more than eighteen years, Dawn had reconnected with David Anselm. More to the point, she had done so with the help of her grandmother and Aunt Roseanne.

As soon as Dawn had moved out of her mother's house, Dolores told her that she was old enough to make her own decision about having contact with her natural father. Over the years, Dell had kept in touch with Anselm with just this purpose in mind. Using the address her grandmother had given her, Dawn had written a letter to her father; almost immediately she'd received a reply. Within the past two months, they had advanced to making phone calls. Aunt Roseanne got involved just after Thanksgiving. She insisted to Marion, Ed, and Alison that she was sorry not to have told them what was going on—long before getting involved, she'd known that Dell maintained contact with Dawn's father—but she'd had to respect the decision not to discuss the matter until Dawn was ready. Convinced that it was only proper for her niece to be allowed to choose freely, at Dawn's request Roseanne arranged a flight to Columbus, Ohio, for her to meet Anselm. Roseanne and Dell had split the cost, calling the ticket their joint Christmas present to Dawn.

So it was this that they'd been arguing about for upwards of an hour that Christmas night while Daniel and Hannah were exiled from the dining room. (It had not escaped Daniel's attention that he was forever being exiled in his own home that year.) That Christmas night, for the first time Daniel was let in on all the details of his mother's past—directly, openly. Almost all of it conformed

to the version he'd heard from his sister, and in the end none of it seemed worth keeping secret in the first place. As for Dawn getting in touch with her father, "All of it would be fine—" Marion kept insisting, "I would be fine with all of it—if only they hadn't done it behind my back. *That's* the part that makes me mad." And Ed and Aunt Alison nodded gravely in agreement. But Daniel wondered, if his mother had not been so secretive about her past, would his sister's secrecy have seemed necessary? Not to mention that he was certain Marion wouldn't have been simply "fine with it" had Dawn come to her from the first.

Marion and Alison stayed up all night talking in the living room and going through the better part of a box of wine. All the while, Aunt Alison sat with her fingers interlaced, her hands resting calmly on her lap as she nodded along with her lips pursed in concentration. The following morning, on very little sleep, Alison would return to the Holiday Inn to pick up Roseanne and drive her back down to North Carolina.

After wishing his family a perfunctory "Merry Christmas"—since it was past midnight it wasn't even Christmas anymore—Daniel climbed the stairs to go to bed. Sure, Christmas had turned out to be a nightmare: Aunt Roseanne and his mother were no longer speaking, and there was sure to be some nuclear-family fallout when Dawn returned for her presents. But at least Daniel finally had his room back. After only a few weeks, the invader had been driven home.

He threw open the windows to air out the smell of Aunt Roseanne's perfume, and then sat at his desk and pulled his journal from its hiding place. Given that the remains of Christmas were still smoldering downstairs, a long entry detailing all he'd learned that night poured out of him effortlessly. Thinking about how horrible Christmas had turned out, the funny thing was the post-dinner powder keg was not even the worst part of it. For Daniel, the holiday had been ruined long before he'd uttered the words "David Anselm" at the dining room table. What really

bothered him, what had been bothering him the better part of a month, was that being there with his family no longer seemed to make any sense. Certainly the holiday itself had no significance. There was a tree and they'd had turkey for dinner and the cartoons had been about Christmas, but Daniel felt as if he'd just spent an evening—indeed, four whole days of winter break—with a group of strangers. Somehow he had gone this long without seeing it clearly, but now it stood out starkly in his mind: They were alien to him. But no, he corrected himself, *he* was the alien, really. Because they all seemed to share so much, while he had nothing more in common with them than a few measly genes. Aside from that, not a single thought or sentiment. Not a single opinion on politics or religion. Not a single element of his outlook on life. He and those people, they were completely separate. They were light-years apart. They were entirely distinct universes. And Daniel's being there at all was haphazard. He might as well have been dropped by a stork into a home in Caspar, Wyoming, or Nome, Alaska, or Chattanooga, Tennessee—a small farm in southern France, a remote fishing village in Japan, a shabby yurt on the steppe, or a sun-beaten tent in Sub-Saharan Africa—anywhere, anywhere at all. These people, God, he thought with a mix of fear, regret, and repulsion, these people were just random individuals that he happened to have the most tenuous of connections with—the completely accidental connection of love and blood. And after that night he had no idea whether blood or love even mattered. He loved them, yes, he loved them, and they loved him—but they did not know him and he did not know them at all. And he was no longer sure whether anyone anywhere could know another person. And he wondered whether love was not just a form of ignorance, our way of groping through the dark, lost and lonely, hoping to find one another.

Suddenly Daniel felt all alone and yet not alone enough.