

"The world certainly has changed since I was a girl," Cilla's mother was saying. She had the newspaper open on the kitchen table and was poring over it with loud murmurs of disapproval. "Take for example. . . ."

Cilla was at the stove, dreamily staring at a fried egg swimming in oil, a fat yellow eye in a pan, eerie and nerve-wracking. She herself didn't eat eggs, but she cooked them as a concession to her mother who was now detailing in anxious tones the latest developments in a murder trial that had recently shocked the nation.

"He actually *gutted* them. Can you imagine? Just the sheer physical force that would take. And those girls. . . so young, with their lives ahead of them. . . what would make a man do such a thing?" And then she visibly shivered for Cilla's benefit.

Cilla flipped the egg, inadvertently breaking the membrane on top. Yellow goo ran through the oil and hardened in odd lines like arteries. "Oh, shit," she muttered, and picked up the pan and dumped the broken egg in its trail of oil into the trash. There on the front of her clean white tee shirt was a tiny speck of egg yolk that she tried quickly to brush off.

"When you flip eggs," her mother glanced up, "you want to turn them more gently."

"I know," said Cilla with newfound resignation. She didn't even snap the words when she said them. She refused to fight any more with her mother, what was the point? One of the nice things about getting older, she thought to herself. My mother's herself and I'm myself, and that's that. Besides, if she had disagreed with her mother just now, it wouldn't have had anything to do with the eggs, which would have served merely as pretext for all the things Cilla had never said but was long past wishing she had.

"Says right here he had a normal childhood," Cilla's mother went on. "Both parents at home, siblings. He was a middle child. Maybe he was neglected. You know after I had you, I worried about the boys, you took so much of my attention."

Cilla braced herself as she cracked a fresh egg into the white bowl where it sat, glistening. This time I'll get it right, she muttered to herself.

"First all the hospital time. . . then the tubes. . . you really were a miracle of modern medicine, you know."

It occurred to Cilla as she gently slid the egg into the pan that all the years she'd suffered thinking her mother had blamed her for being born premature ("a preemie," her mother had introduced her as for years) that maybe she'd been wrong. Had her mother's tone softened over the years, or had Cilla always misunderstood the inflection? Now, at forty, Cilla thought to herself how maybe she had never really listened properly to her mother. What did she, Cilla, know of having six children, including one who slowly over several very strained months defied medical odds? Nothing, that's exactly what she knew.

She wasn't childless by choice, it was true, but it had begun to dawn on her that if she'd really wanted children as badly as she believed she did, she would have them by now. In the world she occupied, many of her friends were what they referred to as "child-free," as if they had managed to avoid some pervasive blight that had swept through the city and taken down a whole generation. And while Cilla liked children, even loved them, she often tried to imagine what the day to day of caring for someone else would be like. Which is exactly what her mother had done, for thirty years, until the youngest boy graduated high school and went off to college. A child every two years, like clockwork, as if synchronized to some cosmic schedule connected to the rhythm of the reproductive universe.

Cilla turned the egg carefully, and watched the edges begin to crisp and curl slightly. Eggs. As a child she'd referred to them as "ughs." That's what they were, disgusting and nasty, completely unpalatable. The fights she'd had with her mother who had tried to disguise them—scrambled, beaten, fluffed, boiled, covered with mayonnaise and slathered onto bread for that ultimate of horrors known as "egg salad" that her mother favored. *When you've got eight mouths to feed. . .* that had been the drumbeat of Cilla's childhood.

"Says right here," Cilla's mother went on, "that he was adored by his family. But then he started hearing voices in his head when he was about seven, telling him it would be fun to kill a woman, and he started looking at women and thinking about it. Can you imagine? At seven? Now what on earth would prompt a child to think of such a thing? Why I've never heard of such a thing."

Yes, you have, thought Cilla. Yes, you have. We all have. It's so predictable, it's a cliché. The kid no one suspects, the nice neighbor boy, the one who always helped old ladies carry their groceries, who yes sirred and yes ma'amed everyone he could, the kind of boy you'd send your daughter off to the prom with because he had such nice manners.

The egg was done. Cilla carefully ladeled it out of the pan and slid it onto one of her mother's floral patterned china plates. Once upon a time those plates had been reserved "for company," and sat for months unused in the china cabinet. Now, Cilla thought, her mother had figured out that those plates were just going to waste. Cilla's father was dead, the boys had their lives, Cilla had hers, her mother didn't make big meals any more (in fact, Cilla was rather concerned by how little her mother was eating these days), and now the once cherished china plates were being used for ordinary meals, the kind of meals she'd been fixing her mother for the last two days, ever since she arrived. And, oddly, her mother hadn't even put up a fuss. She'd accepted! And accepted graciously.

Cilla buttered and cut the toast into triangles the way her mother had once done for her, and stacked the wedges on either side of the egg. The plate had an artful look, and she set it down to her mother's right, and announced in a voice that echoed her own childhood, "Breakfast is served." There had always been a bit of irony in her mother's tone when she'd said that, one full of implication.

"Now this will interest you," her mother went on, glancing only briefly at the egg and toast. She had placed her index finger on the newspaper to hold her place and looked directly at Cilla through her thick-lensed glasses. "Says right here he lived briefly in San Francisco in the 1980s. Just think! You might have passed him on the street."

"San Francisco's a very big place," Cilla said, pulling out the chair across from her mother. Years ago, the family had always eaten in the dining room, out of necessity, but now here they were, just the two of them, a perfect fit in her mother's tiny, sunny kitchen, the room that had once seemed so vast and complicated during her early growing up years, a place ruled by her mother with unquestioned authority and control. The same little curtains were still at the kitchen window, though the sink was new, and the countertops had been replaced. But everything else was the same, down to the little decals on the cupboards.

"Yes, I'm sure it is," said Cilla's mother absently, taking a bite of first egg, and then toast, and then murmuring with pleasure. She chewed carefully, then swallowed. "This is very good, dear. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"He worked as a chef in some restaurant out there. Imagine! He even cooked for people!"

Cilla said nothing, just leaned back in the chair, and thought how odd it was that here she was here at ten in the morning relaxing in her mother's sunlit kitchen, when normally she would be downing a second espresso and racing back to her desk to finish up paperwork. Bird song poured through the open windows. Cilla's mother kept feeders on the sills, and was currently hoping to tempt one of the migrating

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cerulean warblers to stop by on its route. So this was what it meant to be retired, Cilla thought. You lounge around in the mornings, waiting for a glimpse of migrating cerulean warblers. Afternoons you do some volunteer work or play Scrabble or cards with friends, and then in the evenings you turn on the television to see what's on, and settle back down on the sofa in the indentation that always conforms to your body.

This afternoon three of Cilla's mother's friends were coming by, one of them an ex-neighbor whose children Cilla had known growing up, but the other two were women Cilla had never met before, and she could tell her mother was hoping to make a good impression on them.

"I told them you're an attorney," she said. "They were all very impressed. Now of course you remember Helen Marksberry's kids. I think you had a little crush on the oldest boy, Freddy. Did I tell you he married a Brazilian girl and they have three just gorgeous children?"

Cilla thought she could detect just a bit of edge in her mother's voice, a faint twinge of accusation. No matter what, Cilla started to tell herself, no matter what I do. . . . But then she had to remind herself that her mother was not one of these women who dote on grandchildren, or encourage their children to produce offspring. In fact, her brood of six had produced exactly two grandchildren, two girls, one the daughter of Cilla's oldest brother, and one the daughter of Cilla's youngest, neither of whom Cilla's mother seemed to have much more than a passing interest in. Something happened to those of us in the middle, Cilla thought. Maybe growing up in a family of six makes you think twice about it all.

The two granddaughters were not often mentioned, except as afterthoughts. The one lived with Cilla's brother Michael and his wife Olivia in Boston, and seemed to be so occupied with various outside activities that she could never fit it into her schedule to make it to Indiana to see her grandmother, a fact Cilla secretly suspected signaled that the last time the girl had come she'd been bored out of her mind. She believed this because she herself had been bored out of her mind growing up here, and couldn't wait to make a beeline after high school for college in California. Cilla's mother didn't seem too bothered by the fact that the granddaughter was indisposed, though she occasionally passed little comments about how over-indulged Stephanie seemed to be. It was true, but as Cilla knew first-hand, any sort of concession to a child signaled indulgence to Cilla's mother. The other granddaughter lived in Louisville, and was more easily available, a sweet child named Andi, who was part of a rather complicated "blended" family and had several half- and then step-siblings Cilla could never keep straight, but who was amiable enough, and impressed Cilla's mother by offering to help when she visited.

There had been several years that had passed when Cilla didn't get home to visit. She thought about those now, wondering how she could have let it happen, but it had happened, and it had happened because she didn't want to come home, because this place had never really felt like home to her. Though her parents traveled all over the world before her father died, her mother had always been provincial, and, no, Cilla wasn't being a snob to say that, her mother had traveled more than Cilla had, but it hadn't seemed to make any difference. And though her mother was a voting Democrat in a state that was predominantly Republican, and supported a woman's right to choose, and though her mother believed in equality and refused to tolerate any negative remarks about people of other races or homosexuals, Cilla knew that her mother had always, on some very basic level, disapproved of her.

There had also been fierce love, too, but Cilla could tell early on that she did not bring joy to her mother the way her brothers did, specially the oldest one, that in some way Cilla did not understand, her birth had been a disruption, something her mother had never really recovered from.

*You required a lot of attention and care. . . It was a very hard time for your father and me, we worried about you all the time. . . You were so tiny, so fragile, it's unbelievable that you're so tall and healthy now, and so successful. . . They even thought for a while there might be brain damage, you know. . . .*

For years, Cilla had hated hearing her mother recount the early years, the years she couldn't recall,

giving her mother an unfair advantage of getting to narrate it all from the perspective of an over-burdened mother who cooked three meals a day and kept six children clean and fed and who, when Cilla was only fifteen months old, found herself pregnant again, with the sixth and final child.

*I had my tubes tied*, Cilla's mother confessed a year ago, much to Cilla's surprise, since her mother had always been extremely secretive in matters of procreation and sex. *Your father would have kept me pregnant for the rest of my life. I started having kids at twenty-five, and had my last at thirty-seven. My very last. I told him, it's over now, this is it, and we had a huge argument about it. You know your father didn't believe in interfering with God's plan. I said screw God's plan! I want my body back.*

Cilla had had no idea. She tried to imagine this conversation between her parents; it seemed unthinkable. Her father had been a gentle, easygoing man. Yet from her mother's description he sounded like an over-sexed maniac who couldn't keep his hands off his wife. Something touching, she thought. Her parents had loved each other tremendously, and she had always envied their intimacies, the verbal exchanges in sotto voce, the way her father would sometimes slide up behind her mother and bury his face in her neck. When she was growing up, Cilla had been completely disgusted, or "grossed out," as she and her friends called it. Parents were old people. They weren't supposed to have passion. When she realized one day, precisely, in fact, the day she turned forty, that at the same age, her mother had six children under the age of fifteen, what she had always taken for granted morphed into the inconceivable. Cilla could scarcely get herself up in the mornings, let alone imagine what it would be like to prepare breakfast for eight.

"The egg and toast were delicious, dear. Thank you so much." Her mother was smiling at her now. She had closed the newspaper, and was now taking small sips of coffee. "You sure you don't want some?"

Cilla didn't have the heart to tell her mother she couldn't drink drip coffee from a can, that she would go for a walk later and find an espresso shop, so she told a white lie. "I'm trying to cut down."

"I thought you were such a caffeine addict!" her mother, with the memory of an elephant, said. "Remember two years ago, at least I think it was two years ago, because Michael had just gotten that promotion and Eddie was buying a house, you came home, and you brought all that special coffee with you from some place in the Bay Area. . . now you called it something. . . what was it?"

"Peet's Coffee," said Cilla, with the twinge of consumer shame her mother never failed to elicit. "Yes, I thought everyone would like it."

"Well, it looked like very expensive coffee to me," said her mother. "Like something you'd get in Europe. I know they have some of those places here in town now, I think it's here because of the college, and so many kids from out of state, but I've never gone in one. Helen told me coffee in those places was as much as three dollars a cup! You can buy a whole can of coffee for that price."

Cilla nodded. Her mother was right. Over-indulged, she thought to herself. Over-indulged. I eat out when I want, I buy two hundred dollar shoes at the drop of a hat, I'm not rich, but I have no one else to care for. So why not? And she remembered what her father used to say, *you can't take it with you*. It had been the one source of tension between her parents—money—and she had vowed that would never be the case with her.

"Just so you remember," her mother said, "the ladies are coming over at two, and I'd really love for you to join us. Now if you have something else to do, of course, I wouldn't want to stop you, but it would be nice if you could stick around and get to know them. I've been telling them all about you, how you wrote that report or whatever for that Supreme Court case. . . ."

"No, Mom, I didn't write a Supreme Court brief," Cilla corrected. "My firm had a case that was granted cert. . . ." She stopped ". . . that the Supreme Court decided to hear, but I wasn't really involved,

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except for a little research, that's all. . . ."

"Well, but that's very important work in a very important case obviously," her mother said. "I wouldn't downplay that."

"I'm not downplaying," Cilla said, sitting straight up in the kitchen chair. "I'm simply being precise."

"Well," her mother sighed, "the point is, my friends were very impressed. You know in my day women didn't go to law school, or at least very few did. . . ."

"Well, there weren't that many even when I went," said Cilla, and then realized her error. Her mother was right. Her mother was always right. She half wondered what her mother would have done if she hadn't married her father and had six children, bing, bang, bam. But her mother had never given signs of any regrets or resentment. In fact, she still would say with a big smile, "I was so lucky. I always wanted children, and I had six beautiful ones. Not everyone can say that."

Cilla got up and cleared the plate and fork from the table.

"Why thank you!" said her mother. No protests this time around. No insistence that Cilla sit down. No, finally, after all these years, her mother was delighted to be waited on, and Cilla was, much to her own surprise, delighted in doing it. The old ache was there, but it had lessened over time. She almost felt as if she could tell her mother things now, that they could talk, and she could somehow explain everything.

"You know," said Cilla's mother, turning her attention to the local section of the newspaper, "the Clemente boys became lawyers."

Cilla could barely remember the Clemente boys. And she didn't give a damn about any of these people here, and she was weary of feigning interest in her mother's circumscribed world.

"Really," she said, running water over the plate and fork, and squirting a little dishwashing liquid on them. Her mother would be horrified to see she wasn't filling the sink with water, but this is how single career women who mostly ate out washed what few dirty dishes they accumulated.

"They have good careers, I guess, I ran into their mother recently at the Ben Franklin."

"Where do they practice?" Cilla asked politely, as she began drying the plate and fork with one of her mother's floral dish towels, fresh from the dryer.

"Oh, I don't remember what she said. The one's in Philadelphia, I think, the other one's up in Indianapolis, or maybe she said Fort Wayne. But here it says that one of the Clementes, it must be a grandson, I would imagine, has just been accepted to Harvard. Well, surprise, surprise, the Clementes were people with connections. And now they want to advertise in the paper. I hope you don't mind that we never did that with you kids. I mean, I think there's a limit to how much parents brag."

Years ago, Cilla wouldn't have been able to conceal her impatience being forced to listen to details about trivia, including people she barely remembered. Her younger self had once cried out, *Mother, don't you ever ask me about me? don't you want to know how it took me years to get over what we never talked about because you thought it was best not to make a fuss, as you called it?* until it finally dawned on her that her mother knew everything she needed to know about her, and maybe even more than Cilla knew she knew. After all, her mother had known her all her life, before even Cilla had imagined a self. Her mother had cared for her, loved her, tubes and all, scrawny body, arms and legs the size of ink pens, a needy, sickly, tiny child who, according to all forecasts, should not have lived. The one girl among sons, a child Cilla's mother had never known quite what to do with, but maybe did her best with, who disappointed her in ways Cilla could never comprehend, but then the disappointment became mutual, and whose grief over what happened to almost-fourteen year old Cilla that hot summer afternoon could never find its way into words. At least not words that would make sense in her mother's kitchen.

And now here she was, in that same kitchen, trying not to think about all that, vigorously wiping

down the counter tops with the fresh floral towel angling in between the Felix the Cat cookie jar, and the variously-sized tins marked Flour, Sugar, and Salt. And for the first time in years, she felt that awful swelling in her throat, the one she had tried to swallow down for years, the one that made it difficult to get food past, or even talk around, until finally, one day, and she could not name the day, she decided that maybe, just maybe, life went on, just like in the platitudes. She had flown here to her mother's house of her own free will, not out of obligation during a holiday with the buffer of siblings and the hustle and bustle of all the arrivals and departures, the flurry of updates called out in the uproar of familial chaos, snow on the ground, or ice in the trees, but now on a warm May morning, having taken her vacation time, not to head for Mexico or Hawaii, or New York City, bypassing the Midwest altogether, as she had always done in the last decade, but here, to see her mother. Period.

"Helen's going to be thrilled to see you," her mother went on. "She asks about you constantly and says I must be so proud of you."

*Are you, Mother,* thinks the Old Cilla. And of course she knows the answer. This is how her mother shows her pride. Why was she never able to see this before?

There had been no mention of Cilla's single status (all five of her brothers are attached in one way or another). No questions about who Cilla might be seeing, or if the thing that happened so many years before had made it impossible for Cilla to ever trust a man again. Certainly Cilla had tormented herself over this for a number of years, and she imagined the same thoughts had passed through her mother's head as well. Poor Cilla, the premature baby, a child of trauma, who endured. About a decade before, in a desperate attempt to prove everything was fine, Cilla made the fatal mistake of confiding in her mother about a man she was seeing. Odd, because the man himself hadn't even been that important, but he was someone her mother would likely approve of, and she wanted to make her mother happy, or so she thought. It had been at Thanksgiving, when everyone had flown in, except for Cilla's brother Edward who couldn't leave Florida for some reason she couldn't remember, and the house had been full, and Cilla's father had still been alive, and Cilla, craving her mother's attention, and maybe in some strange way, even her forgiveness, decided to reveal something about her personal life. What a poor strategy she'd chosen! As if you could just wipe the slate clean like that. As if her mother would or could think anything other than of that awful afternoon, in the empty house, when the neighbor boy, yes, the neighbor boy, the long-haired, kind of goodlooking, Alan Shavies, who often hung out with Cilla's brother Peter, found Cilla, thirteen, alone, and what—willing? No, he'd found Cilla, flattered and curious, uncertain and maybe just a little playful. He'd found a girl who began complaining about her mother's strictness, how she couldn't wait to get out in the world and stretch her wings. They had gone into the kitchen because Alan had said he was thirsty. After, she wondered what she had said wrong that had caused the whole mess. What had he understood her to mean? Or did understanding have nothing to do with it? What had she done? Those words echoed through her head for years. Were they words her mother actually used, or had Cilla just imagined she had? She hadn't succumbed, or had she? Is that really what you'd call it? Maybe back then, yes. Now there were other words for it. Strong words that could send a boy to jail. Words that, when spoken, could clear the air like a sudden spring storm, could reverse the ions, shift the blame. But at Thanksgiving, when well-meaning Cilla had tried to do just that, the mere mention of the new boyfriend caused Cilla's mother to jerk her head up suddenly and stare at her daughter. Alarm was written all over her face. She'd said something hasty like, "Well, that's very nice. I'm glad you have a new friend," and dropped the subject.

Cilla had been crushed. The doors were still closed. But what had she expected from a woman who could not bring herself to imagine that such a thing had happened to her own child, and claimed there must have been a terrible mistake, a misunderstanding, why Alan Shavies was a friend of the family. . . . And yet the next day Cilla had seen her mother and father leaving the Shavies' house, and after that the

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two families never spoke, and Alan was “sent away.” That’s all Cilla ever knew for years, and a darkness settled over that house like a toxic cloud, and when the new people moved in, about a year later, Cilla couldn’t bring herself to say hello. For three years, before she went off to college at age seventeen, Cilla could not stand the sight of the house, even after it had been repainted and small children darted through the front yard.

It was unfair the house was allowed to stand, as if nothing had happened. Alan Shavies, she later found out (she never dared ask what happened to him), had grown up, just as she had, married (as she had not), divorced, then remarried, and been in and out of drug rehabilitation centers. Surprise, surprise, as her mother would say. His parents now lived in the retirement center on the other side of town. How blind Cilla had been to think her mother didn’t understand: the same mother who had been so stricken over the event that she struck at the ineffable through cold silence, that on her way home from an errand she had distractedly driven the car into a neighbor’s tree (sure, the street was rain-slick) and almost killed herself, despite her claims to the contrary.

And there was Cilla, home that time for the holidays, trying to revive the past, adult to adult, to put an end to it, as her preoccupied mother basted the turkey and stacked pies that the boys loved so much, and painstakingly put together the little cutglass platters of pickles and radishes and sweet onions that the boys also loved so much. Why had Cilla thought her mother would be comfortable discussing her single daughter’s love life, referring as it did to all that had gone before? Why was Cilla always misjudging? It had been her fault, hadn’t it, her wanting so much for her mother to understand, that she had completely gotten it all wrong? For years she had lived with her own rage toward her mother, the spiteful things she said and did, her father occasionally taking her aside to beg, “Sweetheart, please try to get along better with your mother,” and Cilla thinking with self-pity how no one could see how hard she was trying, why was she the one to break her mother’s heart? Her brothers were no angels, she knew that. And how her brother Michael gently said to her once with great puzzlement, “I don’t know what you expect of Mom. You make the mistake of trying to tell her things.”

So much easier for the boys who’d been doted on, Cilla used to think. They had never really hurt her mother, they had seemingly been immune to difficulties, other than the little minor scrapes now and again, and how unquestioningly their lives had seemed to unfold. But at thirteen, what are you supposed to do? Her father had wept and raged, threatened every living Shavies, and then pulled her close and rocked her, and her mother had fled the room, saying, “Hush, this is crazy, the boys will hear you.”

This trip had been Cilla’s very own idea. Her mother was always delighted when her children came home, specially the boys, of course, but she had never suggested Cilla come alone. Michael tried to get home every six months or so, and so did Eddie, when he could. Philip, no. Peter, no. But Cilla’s mother explained, “Oh, they’re just so busy.” “Busy” was a virtue, it was a reason.

A month ago, just after Cilla had finished a big products liability case, during which the client had lost her mother unexpectedly (the woman’s grief was so acute as to alarm Cilla—she was drinking a third espresso), and the thought struck. She dialed her mother’s number (two hours ahead) and said capriciously, “How would you like to see me in a week?” and her mother had said, “What do you mean? Are you coming here? Do you have business here?” And Cilla said no, she just missed “home,” and would this be a convenient time, and her mother’s voice had gained a luster of thrilled warmth that took Cilla by surprise.

“And leave your work? Leave your job? But you’re so *busy* . . .”

There had been no illness, no near-death experience to prompt the visit. That was the whole point, wasn’t it? It was spring, she had leave time she needed to use or lose. What better reason did she need?

“Why thank you,” her mother said, as Cilla wiped down the front of the refrigerator. Her mother’s

eyesight wasn't what it had once been, and she had missed the little splashes of tomato dotting the door just below the handle.

Cilla turned to smile. It was, after all, a beautiful morning, just the right kind of morning for a cerulean warbler, and she was certain they would see one today. Her mother had showed her a picture in the bird book she kept handy, and instructed Cilla to "keep your eyes peeled."

"I know you probably don't read Dear Abby," her mother said, "but I do get a kick out of her. Here's a woman who's writing in because her husband has been staying late at the office to help train his new secretary who's—get this—been there for three months already! Yeah, right, I can just imagine the kind of training she's getting. . . ."

Cilla was amused.

"Of course, now the tables are turning," her mother went on. "Secretaries aren't just women any more."

This was true. In fact, one of the secretaries at Cilla's firm was a very attractive man. She mentioned this, but her mother wasn't really listening.

"I think having a job like Dear Abby would be so amazing, don't you? Giving advice to total strangers whose lives have nothing to do with yours? A little like playing God, I would think. Sitting around at your kitchen table, just like this, opening letters—I heard her say once she gets about 2000 a day—and she claims she reads every one of them. Do you believe that?"

"Yes," said Cilla, without hesitating. "I bet she does. People count on her. People need to feel listened to."

"She makes a lot of mistakes, though, in her advice. The other day, for example, she advised a woman who was thinking of marrying a man with badly behaved cats to tell the man it was going to be either her or the cats. Now, I think that's wrong, and so did a lot of other readers who wrote in and said the man shouldn't give up his cats for a cat-hating woman."

"Makes sense," said Cilla, surprised by how small the stakes were anymore. Between her mother and her, that was. They could both agree on this point. You don't choose a lover over your cats. Anyone could see that.

"I guess I should change my clothes. . . before your friends come. . . ." Cilla looked down at herself.

"Oh, heaven's no!" said her mother. "You look just fine. You're gorgeous as always. I always wondered who you got your beauty from. Certainly not from me. But you and Michael got all the looks in this family. And right now, you look like you're twenty. Not a shred of gray in your hair and not a wrinkle on your face. You have that lovely olive skin like your aunt Mary. It just doesn't age. And all those years you spent in the sun in California—why, you should be a prune by now, but you're not."

Cilla understood her mother meant this as a compliment, and she accepted it as such.

"I think I'm going to take a little walk then," she said.

"That sounds like a perfect idea," said her mother. "Get out and get some fresh air."

There was a flurry of wings at the windowsill. Cilla turned in expectation. It was a bright red cardinal, helping himself to seed.

"I really hope I see one of the cerulean warblers," she said, and she meant it honestly.

"I bet you will," her mother replied, concentrating back on the paper. "This is the time they come. It's just a brief visit, you know, just a small window of opportunity, and then they're gone until next year."

Cilla closed her eyes briefly and leaned against the counter. She was thinking about the man who'd



murdered all those women, and about how impossible something so grotesque seemed as she stood here in her mother's sparkling kitchen where everything felt so protected and reliably in place. What was her mother thinking to read such a morbid article aloud? After all these years, Cilla knew that everything her mother did had a point, and she couldn't help but wonder. Even now, she thought, I have no idea what my mother really thinks about anything. There was that one moment, when Cilla was about to graduate from high school, that her mother had said to her, "I hope you know that Shavies boy never got to graduate," and then walked away. That was all she ever said, and at the time Cilla had thought her mother cruel for bringing it up that way.

"Well," her mother said now, pushing her chair back from the table, and getting up. "I have spent enough time lounging around this morning. Time to go polish the silver."

The silver? Cilla started to say, for what? Why? But she stopped herself. Later, when she talked to her brother Michael she would mention this as a charming little anecdote about her mother's adherence to meaningless routines, the glue that held her life together. And they would both laugh, amused, Michael shaking his head on the other side of the country, murmuring, "Some things never change." But for now, she maintained her silence, and instead watched the swiftness and ease with which her mother moved toward the kitchen door. There, she paused, and turned briefly to look at Cilla.

"Are you happy these days, darling?" she said. One hand was on the doorjamb, the other at her side. She looked small, but healthy, keenly taking in the world around her.

"Yes," said Cilla, caught off-guard, "yes, I am."

"It seems," said her mother, "that you have such a good and rewarding life with your work and all. You really love it, don't you?"

"Mostly," said Cilla. "Mostly I do."

She was fighting off waves of shock.

"I'm so very happy for you," said her mother. "The way everything has turned out for you. I should have known I'd never have to worry about you, from the moment I first held you in my arms, and felt your heart beating. You are an inspiration, you know. You've made a life a lot of women would die for, you know."

"Really," said Cilla. "I don't know, everyone's lives have ups and downs."

"Yes, well," said her mother hastily, "but you know, people like us, we learn how to ride the tidal waves, don't we?"

And she turned and disappeared into the dining room where Cilla could hear the sound of the squeaky cabinet doors being opened where the silver was kept. The silver. Such an arcane sound to it, like the reference to some older century.

Cilla stood there quietly, remembering how large this room had once seemed to her. Now it was flooded with soft, dappled light, and the air just outside the window was full of birdsong. It was only her third day of the visit and there was still a good chance the cerulean warblers would show. "Bluebirds of happiness," her mother called them. The women friends would arrive that afternoon, and her mother would show Cilla off. With her brothers out of the competition, Cilla would have a starring role. Her mother would narrate Cilla for the friends: *This is my daughter all the way from San Francisco. Helen, you know Cilla already, even though it's been years, I know. Evelyn and Doris, this is my only daughter, Cilla, the lawyer I was telling you about who just had a case at the Supreme Court. . . .*

And Cilla knew that even in the tangle of exaggeration, her mother had stumbled on some sort of truth that bound them together. There would always be different versions, but when you got right down to it, they were pretty much the same. She pushed herself away from the counter and inhaled slowly. On her

way out of the kitchen, she glanced at the paper lying folded on the table. There was a photo of the young man who'd murdered the five women. He looked ordinary and nondescript, white, young, moderately handsome, innocuous. He was someone's son. Someone had given birth to him and raised him.

"Cilla!" Her mother's voice rang loud and clear. "Do you think we'll want some lunch before the women arrive?"

"I'm fine," said Cilla, refocusing her thoughts on the good cup of espresso she would most definitely find on her walk. "But I'd be happy to make you something."

"Well, I was thinking," said her mother, who was still planning every minute out of sheer habit, "that we have some tuna fish in the cupboard and I could make us tuna sandwiches. They used to be your favorite. With capers. I remember."

No matter, thought Cilla, that they were Michael's favorite, and no one had liked capers.

"Sounds fine," said Cilla.

"How about we eat right at one-thirty then?" her mother suggested. "I'm going to steep some tea and put out icebox cookies for the women, but they don't arrive until two. . . ."

"Sounds perfectly civilized," Cilla murmured without any irony. She would take a walk, circle the old neighborhood, make note of the changes, remember whatever little things one wants to remember when going home. She would take her cell phone along and call the office, just to check in, see if she was needed. On second thought, she'd already given them her mother's phone number, she didn't need to take the cell phone.

"I think I'll walk downtown. Can I pick up anything for you at the market?" she asked, passing her mother, who had set out two silver teapots on the dining room table, and was now polishing the lid of one with a soft cloth. The smell of silver polish was familiar and sent the years in reverse. Suddenly Cilla was a small child again, pushing her way through the seething mass of brothers, to where her mother was polishing the silver and her father was stacking the freshly washed china because someone important was coming to the house. Someone her mother distinctly wanted to impress. But all Cilla could remember now was the precision with which her mother had worked, just as she was working now. After all, her mother used to say, that first impression—that's the one that always sticks with you.

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