

A Nurse

At this time, was my dad working in the cable and wire mill? No, this was before. He was trying out a job as a sales representative for a small manufacturer of lighting fixtures. It lasted about a year. When he was out on the road overnight, selling to places such as malls and office buildings, he called us first thing in the morning. "Do you miss us?" I said, and he answered, "Sweetheart! Do you think I'd be out here if I absolutely didn't have to?"

There'd recently been a launch. I always paid attention to launches. I saw a photograph in the paper of a man at a capsule window. The photo was taken by satellite. Even in the photo's grainy fuzziness he looked depressed. I wondered if, in orbit, in awayness that was almost unthinkable, he stayed by the window all the time, not for the sights of stars and galaxies, or the planets in hovering closeness, but to gaze at the earth, the bowl of the earth, with an awful, encompassing loneliness. I thought of my father in a helmet with white starlight on the front. "How's your mother?" he said. "Is she up yet?"

"She went to the store."

"What store? It's not even seven o'clock."

"The twenty four hour. She borrowed Mrs. Philbrick's car." Dad had our car, a Ford wagon. Mrs. Philbrick was our next door neighbor. Her white Chrysler was parked in the driveway between our houses; it gleamed in the early morning sun.

"How are the girls?" said Dad.

"They're great."

None of my sisters would go to school today except Paula. I mean, Maureen

wasn't going. Suzy and Linnie weren't old enough. Linnie was the youngest, and although she was nearly two, she hadn't started talking. She didn't walk much, either, but someone was always around to pick her up and hold her when she cried.

Maureen was sick with a flu that was going around. As the day went on, Suzy, who was four, would get it too, then Linnie. The three of them were in the den watching television. A "National Geographic" was on. As I talked on the phone with Dad I heard Suzy gasp and start whining. On tv an animal, a weasel, had run out from behind a tree. It caught a gray rabbit by the foot, then broke its neck. We could see a red trail in the snow as the weasel dragged it away.

"Wait a minute, Dad." I went over to the television and switched it to cartoons. "I don't want you watching that stuff," I said. "If you turn it back on, you're getting the same as that bunny." I picked up the phone again and said, "Everyone say hi to Dad." They called to him without paying attention, out the sides of their mouths. My sister Paula was upstairs getting dressed. "Who are you talking to?" she screamed. I covered the mouthpiece with my hand and screamed, "Shut up, Paula."

"Tell Mommy I'll be home by tomorrow afternoon at the latest. I'll call again around suppertime, and don't fight."

"We won't. Do you think about us a lot?"

My dad said, "Mary Ann! If I could be in two places at once, don't you think I'd do it?" Then he said, "Hold down the fort, O.K.?"

"I will."

"Over and out, Chief."

"Over and out," I said back. We hung up. Is a father who isn't with you still yours? What if he answers your questions with questions of his own, and sounds like a man on a radio, not a telephone, and seems to always speak in some kind of code, or a different language?

My mother was a nurse. She had promised Dad she'd never work nights when he was away, but the hospital had called her to cover for someone. They paid an extra twenty dollars for the night shift. When she was gone like this I never slept. Or I woke up abruptly from terrible, bright dreams of blood, with visions of my mother falling asleep in the middle of a routine procedure, which the patient would die of. Then it would take her all morning to deal with the body, and I'd never get to school. Sometimes in these dreams she nodded off to sleep while walking home, and a car shot out in a hazy glare from one of the side streets, and hit her and killed her.

This was what I did to bring her home faster and safely: I made her coffee. I was afraid of matches, so I couldn't light the stove. I put a tablespoon of instant Maxwell House in a cup. I went to the sink, turned on the hot water, and let it run until it steamed; then I filled the cup with water and knelt on the mat. I balanced the cup on the rim of the sink above my head. Then I prayed. I prayed that God would bring my mother home in time for me to reach school before the bell rang, before I poured out the cup on my head, as if I didn't feel it at all. I never did it, though. Something always happened to distract me. My mom came home at last, or the baby cried, or my sisters started a fight and I'd have to get up and go in there.

I spread out a blanket on the den floor for Linnie and Suzy. Maureen said her throat hurt, and she seemed to be running a low fever, so I warmed a piece of flannel on the radiator for her neck. I got out the cough syrup and gave her half a teaspoon. I crushed up four baby aspirin in some applesauce and she ate it and lay down on the couch. My books were on the counter. I was ready for school, but my mother called from the hospital to tell me that someone had died on her shift. "I swear to God, I'll make this up to you," she said.

Paula came downstairs wearing clothes so wrinkled you could hardly tell what they were. She wore socks she had taken from the dirty laundry basket in the cellar. She came in the kitchen and took the last two donuts from the box in the freezer and threw them in her book bag. She was next in age to me. Every passion that either of us had ever felt could be thrown in an instant to the flames of how we hated each other. She went into the den and kissed Maureen, then Suzy and Linnie, on their foreheads. "Be good today, and don't run high fevers," she said, as if she were Dad. When she walked by me I punched her in the stomach as hard as I could, then ran into the bathroom and shut the door and leaned on it. Paula pushed at it, but I was stronger, and she gave up. "I'm waiting until we're grownups and then I'm getting you once and for all, so maybe you should never grow up," she said.

Nobody felt like eating breakfast. I crumbled some graham crackers in a bowl for Linnie and Suzy. I poured in some milk and placed it on the rug, as if they were two cats. "Get out of here, you're just making us sicker," said Maureen.

I went upstairs and made the beds. I stood in the hall for a while and went over some vocabulary words of the list I had memorized for French class. Last night, while

my mother was getting ready to leave for work, we watched *Fantasia*. I knew that my sisters believed they were sick from being scared by the demons at the end, but I wasn't thinking about demons. I couldn't remember any of the music. I remembered the way night came, like a woman in a long, dark cloak, walking slowly and steadily from across the planets, down long stairs of stars to the dusky sky of earth, to the trees, the hills, along the roads. Wherever she went it was quiet. The planets, to her, were like stones in a stream. Her feet were like the brightest of the stars; her head was always covered by a hood.

The phone rang. I thought it would be my mom, calling to say that she was on her way home after all, but it was Paula.

"Hi, Mommy," Paula said. "Have you got a minute? Mrs. Lang wants to talk to you." Mrs. Lang was the assistant principal of our school. She was young and still new, having only arrived that September. But we knew she loved rules, and we feared her.

"Mrs. Baird?"

"Yes," I said, my voice low.

"I was about to send Paula home for hitchhiking, but she says your younger kids have a virus."

"I never got in anyone's car," said Paula in the background.

"A teacher saw her with her thumb out," said Mrs. Lang.

I said, "Please keep Paula in school today. I always work things out with my kids when my husband comes home."

"Mrs. Baird? Are you all right?"

"Actually, I'm not so great. I have just had a miscarriage," I said.

"Oh!" Then, after a pause, Mrs. Lang said, "Will you be keeping Mary Ann out of school?"

"Certainly not. I feel strongly that education comes first with my kids. But I may have to, just a little."

"Tell Mary Ann I'll talk to her teachers. I'll send home her assignments with Maureen."

"Thank you," I said. Mrs. Lang didn't know that Maureen was home sick; anything she gathered to send me would fall through the cracks somewhere, lost forever.

Maureen had fallen asleep. I got Suzy and Lynn up. It was time for their lessons.

I had a classroom in the basement near the laundry room. It was made up of milk crates, for seats, and four desks that Dad and I bought at the fire sale when a school on the other side of town burned down. I also had a chalkboard. But Paula and Maureen had written all over it with crayons, and we couldn't use it.

Suzy and Lynn were wearing their slippers so I carried them over to the classroom one at a time. I put Lynn in the old baby stroller. It was starting to fall apart but she didn't mind. Suzy's cheeks were flushed. Her head barely showed above the top of the desk where I put her. I gave her a pencil and she looked at it and groaned.

"You're not too sick to learn," I said. "And the quicker you're done, the quicker you can go back upstairs."

"Make Maureen."

"Maureen's seven. She already knows the alphabet." I picked up my wooden slat. I held it in the air. It was a strip of wood, which I had taken from one of the window

shades upstairs. "Suzy. Tell me three words that start with the letter G. One is what you were eating in your milk. You can't say green, gravy, or garage, because you had those yesterday."

"Graham crackers," said Suzy.

"Good," I said. Then I whispered, "That's another one."

"Does it count if you said it first?"

"Of course." I held out my other hand, palm up. Linnie started rocking the carriage and it sounded like the springs would break.

"I'm cold, and it stinks down here," said Suzy.

"We're almost done," I said. I brought the slat down and struck my open palm. I didn't feel it much so I did it again.

"Blessed Mother, Holy Saint Anne, and Blessed Saint Theresa, the Little Flower. Please make me good, or I will die." Linnie was trying to climb out of the carriage so I picked her up. Her forehead felt hot. She had some cracker crumbs in her hair and I brushed them away.

"Girl," said Suzy, and I cried, "Correct!"

I carried Linnie across the cellar floor in my arms like Saint Christopher. Then I strode back and got Suzy and saved her, too.

To cover some more empty spaces between paychecks from my dad's commissions, my mother went out on odd jobs or emergencies, or filled in for nurses in doctors' private practices.

The phone rang. It was Edna Fleury, the secretary at Dr. Mason's. She and my mother had gone to high school together. She was calling to say that one of their Medicare patients had died--Ernie Timko, from the housing project. The hospital had sent a resident to take care of the death certificate. They'd sent an ambulance, but something was wrong. The ambulance was sitting in front of their building blocking traffic.

I handed the phone to my mom. She was sitting at the kitchen table. She hadn't taken her coat off yet. In her lap was Suzy. Standing at her side, pressing her face into the coat at my mother's hipbone, was Lynn. Maureen called out from the den, "Nobody cares that I'm sick."

"Her fever's not that high, Mom," I said.

"What is it," said my mom into the phone, and Edna said, "Tell her to cut that out." She thought she'd been talking to my mom all along.

I could hear Edna talking through the phone. Almy Timko, Ernie's wife, had locked her door, and would not turn over the body. Edna had already called Public Health as well as Visiting Nurses. No one was free to go there.

Thomas Mason was the only doctor in town my mother actually liked, which I knew because of the way she talked about him. She always called him an old fart.

"Why are you calling me? Why don't you send the old fart," said my mother.

"I can't. I overbooked him and he's up to his elbows."

"I worked all night. I just this minute got home." My mother held the phone to her other ear and listened to Edna for a while, then said, "I'll talk to her. But I'm charging you time and a half. In cash, Edna, same as always."

"I'm going with you," I said. Paula was home from school; it was her turn to watch the kids now.

"I'm not that beat, Mary Ann. I took a nap around three. And I only had half a ward."

But all I had to do was close my eyes to see my mother slumped asleep in the back of a cab, while the driver, with a face as sinister as Charon's, ferried her away to another part of the country. He would pull off the road, wake her, and snicker when he pointed to the meter.

My mother looked at me, over the top of Suzy's head, with sleepy eyes that never seemed all the way open anymore. I couldn't believe how hard she made it for me to keep her alive. She said, "I don't want you growing up to be no nurse."

"I'm *not*."

Almy Timko had stripped her kitchen in a burst of cleaning. She'd put everything from the counters into the sink. She had washed the walls. She had been washing the floor on her hands and knees with an old-fashioned bristle brush. Everything smelled like ammonia and Ajax.

There were three rooms in the Timkos' apartment. In the small bedroom off the kitchen, Ernie Timko lay straight down the middle of the bed. "This is Mary Ann, my oldest," said my mom. After Almy let us in, she went into the hall and looked around, as if the two men from the ambulance crew were trying to sneak in behind us. They were waiting on the landing. Almy shut the door quickly and shot the bolt.

My mom said, "I've known you a long time, Almy. This isn't like you. You don't want the town ambulance taking him, because you think there's a black mark against them. Is that it?"

Almy shook her old head and said, "That's not it, but I heard of it." There were some bald spots in her hair where pink scalp was showing, about the size of dimes. If someone looked inside her brain, I thought, they might find, like words inscribed in rock, this message: "Nothing ever worked out the way I wanted it."

I was next to my mother. I leaned back on my heels to look in the back room, so I could first see the dead man with quick, averted glances. I was only just starting to get the hang of looking, at the things I most wanted to see, from the sides of my eyes, while staring at something else. It has always been amazing to me how this works.

The dead man was dressed in pajamas. He lay on top of the covers—just a sheet and blanket that had been tucked in the mattress army-style. I hadn't been able to see his face. In a funny, unnatural way, his feet stood up straight. He was barefoot, but looked as if he wore invisible shoes. His toes were in perfect, slanted lines.

What black mark?

Almy bent down and picked up the floor brush. There was a silver bucket of sudsy water at her feet. I said to my mother, "I think I'll go wait in the hall." She gave me a look; she'd forgotten I'd come with her.

"You knew his heart was going, Almy," said my mom. "He'll get a good burial. You've got it coming to you from Social Security."

"I believe you're here to wash him," said Almy.

"That's not how it works now. They'll do it when they lay him out. Listen to me, Almy. Wait till you see how they fix him up. You've got to let the guys in now and do their job."

"Before he goes, he's washed. I'd do it myself, but I haven't touched him all these years, and it doesn't feel right to me to start now."

My mom sighed. "You don't have to tell me anything that went on with you and Ernie. And I can't go back to the doctor and tell him you wouldn't listen to reason."

"I listened," said Almy. She drew herself up, as if steeling herself. There was something in the look of her shoulders and back that made me think, as I stared at her, of a bird on a branch or a fence, gearing up to start singing, just to do it. I held back my own shoulders and stood up straighter and kept watching her.

"I can see that he died peaceful, Almy," said my mom in a quiet voice.

"I never said anything outside this house about him and me, and I'm not saying anything now, just because he's gone," said Almy. "There's rubber sheets on the dresser. There's a basin and sponge in the bathroom, all put out, and the clippers. His suit's hanging on the back of the closet door. I don't expect you to shave him, if you're not feeling steady with your hands."

"Go and wait in the other room, Mary Ann," said my mother. She unbuttoned her coat, took it off, and handed it to Almy. She pushed up the sleeves of her sweater. There was a run in her white stockings, long and laddered; there were stains on her white uniform just above the hem, like a mother who'd come back from a war. She took off her shoes and gave them to Almy, and Almy set them down by the door.

The other room was a dining room. It contained an enormous, shiny mahogany table that smelled like Lemon Pledge. It didn't look as if a crumb had ever fallen on its surface. There were six high-back chairs around it. I pulled one out and sat down. I guessed that, if Almy hadn't been close enough to her husband to have touched him, as she'd said, she couldn't have slept in their bed with him. Had the old woman slept, for years of nights, on this table, stretching the length of the room like a brown island?

I heard my mother go into the bathroom. I just sat. There was no other furniture in here. Almy's long, heavy drapes, threadbare along the rods, and bleached here and there by too much sunlight, were partly open. The dusk of late autumn appeared at the edge of the sky, and in the gray, soft light, the nearby buildings, with their ramshackle fire escapes and flat roofs, were almost lovely. The Mobil Station's sign on the corner was lit up, and so were the huge red letters of the sign at CVS. I couldn't see a sunset, though—just a fading.

I thought about my dad, who might have been looking, that moment, at his watch. Or, as he glanced out a window somewhere at the slow descent of the night, he might have been shutting his case of brochures. He would say, to whoever he was talking to, "Excuse me, but I have to call my family, or I'm in trouble." The phone would start ringing on its table in our hall. I could hear it, almost, with the leftover sounds of the times he had already called us, and the phantoms of more calls to come. I didn't want to think about which of my sisters, in my absence, would answer it; but I hoped it would be the baby. Sometimes Paula or I, trying to get Lynn timer to start talking, carried her to the phone and said, "Answer it, Lynn timer," like that was her job. So far all she was doing was picking it up and slamming it down again.

My mother went into the bedroom. I waited. I knew that she'd have to go back to the bathroom because she hadn't brought everything out. When she did, I got up and followed her in there. I whispered, "What did the men from the ambulance do? Tell me, because I really have to know. When we get home I'll make supper, and I'll give the baby a bath. I'll give Suzy one, too, I swear."

One thing about talking to someone who has worked a long time without sleep is that they enter a strange, fuzzy, in-between area, as if they're tranquilized. If you get them just right, their exhaustion is like a truth serum. My mom didn't say, like she did when she was more awake, "Mary Ann! Sometimes I look at you, and I wonder if the heart you have in your body is a human one." She just said, "Paul Gallagher was driving his father's ambulance one night to the city. He didn't have anyone else with him. He was bringing a nine year old boy to Children's Hospital. But instead of taking the toll road he went the long way. They figured that, in the extra minutes it took, that's when the appendix went. The Gallaghers can keep their license, but they can't drive out of town."

I wondered which of the two men on the landing was Paul Gallagher, so I could memorize his face as we left. "The boy died?"

"For the price of a toll on a toll road," said my mom.

"Were the Gallaghers sued?"

"They couldn't. No one knew about the appendix. They were bringing him in for something else, for tubes in his ears, I think."

"How long is this going to take you?"

"Half an hour. Remind me, as soon as we get home, to write Edna a bill. I'm so tired!" I let her go back to Mr. Timko. Almy was standing in the kitchen, near the

refrigerator, with my mom's coat in her arms. She was staring at her bare, clean counters. One of her hands was full of coat. In the other, she held two shiny coins--quarters, I thought, or half-dollars. I wasn't afraid of her. I pointed to the coins. "Are you going to put those on his eyes?"

"They're for your mother," said Almy. "It's her tip."

"Oh," I said. "Do you have any children?"

"It's just been him and me."

Then I said, just blurting it out without planning to, "My dad used to work in town, but they laid him off."

"I hear that a lot of the places doing poorly might be hiring again," said Almy.

"His old place went bankrupt. He's away on a business trip right now. Sometimes he has to be gone for four or five days. But it's twice as long when I think about it, like it's doubled, because it always goes by really slowly."

Almy tilted her head slightly to one side, inclined toward the bedroom, like she was pointing to it. "Well, it's not the same thing at all," she said.

"I guess not," I said. "Were you married a long time?"

"We were."

"Are you going to set up some candles?"

"Maybe I will, later on."

"Will you keep them going all night?"

"I might, if they last," said Almy.

I went back into the dining room and sat down. I held myself rigidly; the table was so waxy I thought, if I touched it, I'd leave fingerprints. Then I touched my

fingertips to the edge of the table, the way I'd seen older girls in my neighborhood sit on porch steps with Ouija Boards. Since I'd found myself absolutely having to know what had happened to give Gallagher's a black mark, I expected that this would be the thing I delved into.

I began to think about Gallagher's Ambulance rolling slowly and leisurely on the way to Boston, while Death sneaked quietly aboard. I looked down at the rug, which was as worn as the drapes. I sat on my hands. Almy called out, "Do you want a glass of juice? I have grapefruit juice," and I jumped.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Timko," I said.

I moved my chair a little so I could see her. She just kept standing there. What would she eat for supper tonight, and who would she talk to? Winter was coming. Would her groceries be bought, would her furnace stay on, would her gas and electricity keep flowing?

I thought about Ernie Timko. My mom had closed the bedroom door. Now and then I heard her, softly padding around in there in her old stockings. I said, "Everything's O.K., Mr. Timko. You can get up now."

He stirred. He got up off the bed and came out walking with me and Almy. He said, "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," I said. "You'll see in a minute."

In the dusky air, we passed like shadows through the town where we lived. We went by the downtown shops and the post office, by the bars, the hospital, the fire station, my school. We went by the factories—the two still running, and the three closed down, and by my dad's old job at the printing company, on a dark side street near the football

field. I paused as we went by it, like I could look in a window and see him, as if he were sitting in the bindery department on a big wooden spool during afternoon break. Sometimes, if he'd run out of cash for the canteen truck, he called home. My mother fixed him a thermos of something--tea or coffee or chicken broth--and I carried to him after school. I'd run up the stairs, then walk over to him with the thermos behind my back.

"What have you got for me, honey? A hundred thousand dollars? Are we rich yet?" When I handed him the thermos, he opened it slowly, and streamers of steam rose up. He'd sip from it without using the cup, which always, no matter how often we rinsed it, tasted like dish detergent. Standing there watching him, I'd say, "Be careful that you don't burn your mouth, Dad." I would suddenly find myself aware of my father through my skin--mutely, simply, and incontrovertibly, the way trees straining upward must always know, somehow, in their leaves and woody fibers, where the roots are.

"How much longer?" said Almy.

"We're almost there," I said.

The new housing development was near the river, and all the houses, once they were finished, would face it. Here and there, where workmen had put in windows, the windows turned wavy and loose, like platefuls of water, then hardened slowly in the day's last light back to glass. "It's that way," I said.

Almy and Ernie went ahead of me. There were bulldozer ridges in the mud of cleared lots, and I called out, "Don't trip!"

But they didn't care; they hurried to their new house. "Look, there it is," said Almy.

It was the one of the developer's prototypes, and the only one finished. The inspection stickers were still on the windows. Attached to the house was a small garage; it was empty except for a pair of aluminum lawn chairs. These two chairs were at the edge, so the overhead door was like a canopy. The garage was cool inside, with the clean smell of cement and new buildings. Almy and Ernie sat down on the chairs like an old married couple on a cruise. Almy took out a blanket from somewhere. She moved her chair closer to her husband's and covered them both with it. They squirmed, getting comfortable, then leaned toward each other sideways, and their shoulders touched.

Almy said, from the shadows fanning out around the doorway, "If you don't mind, him and me would like a moment of privacy, please."

"Oh, sure," I said.

"I didn't ask, but I'm hoping this is paid for."

"It is," I said. When it looked like they had both settled down, I turned and headed back into town on my own. The streetlights were on. I could see them below in rows and curves, between stretches of darkness, like the lights of an airport runway.

I looked around for my mom. I started planning what I'd do to get her home, and where my family would sleep that night. I'd put the sick ones in my parents' double bed. There was a small t.v. in my parents' room. I wouldn't be fussy about how long my sisters were watching it.

My mom could sleep downstairs on the couch. There, I thought, she wouldn't be as likely to wake herself up by reaching, even in her dreams, for my dad. If she had fallen asleep already, or if she drifted away while washing her hands, or putting her shoes on, I would shake her, saying, "We have to go home now, Mom, or that ambulance will

drive to our house, and Paula will let them take the kids."